

NEW

STORY OF THE WESTERN FRONT

HOW NAZI GERMANY
WON AND LOST THE
WAR IN THE WEST



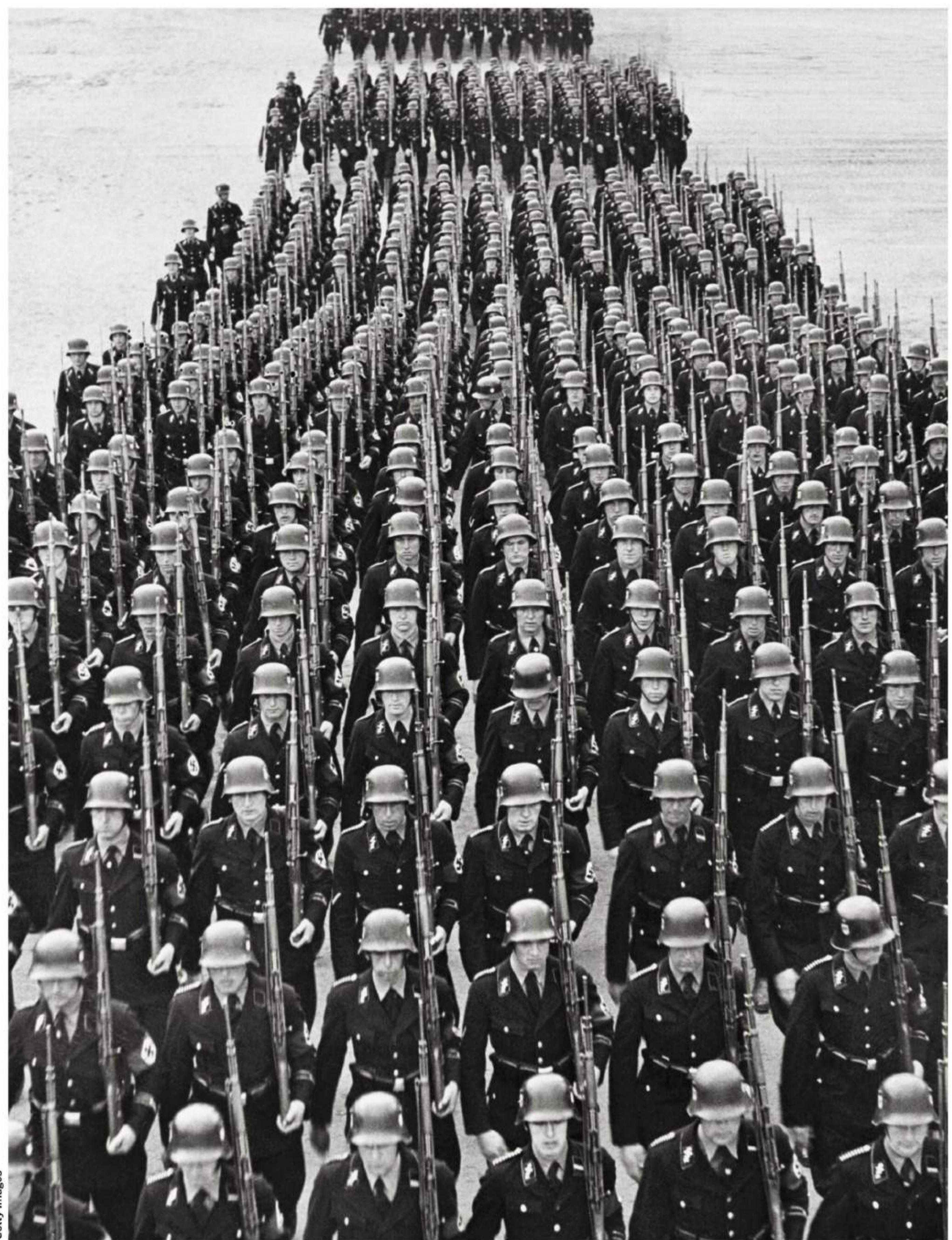
Digital
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THE FALL OF FRANCE

• D-DAY LANDINGS

• END OF THE REICH



WARNING: YOU ARE ENTERING OCCUPIED EUROPE

It is May 1940, and Western Europe holds its breath. Poland has been occupied for almost a year by its twin rulers, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, but since its fall a 'phoney war' has set in. It is about to end in a hail of blood and fire.

By the end of the summer a raft of nations will be crushed beneath the Panzer tracks of the Wehrmacht, including the Low Countries and a stunned France, able to resist for just six weeks before succumbing.

Yet all is not lost. The deliverance at Dunkirk gave Britain hope, and now, with the support of her US allies, she can begin to hit back at a once untouchable enemy. The struggle for Europe has begun.

This is the story of how Nazi Germany swept all before it in the first part of WWII before gradually falling back in the face of overwhelming Allied firepower. It is a tale of courage, deception and brutality, one that will take you from the islands of the Mediterranean to the beaches of Normandy, across the waters of the Rhine and deep into the heart of the Third Reich. It is no exaggeration to say that the fate of the world depended on its outcome.



STORY OF THE WESTERN FRONT

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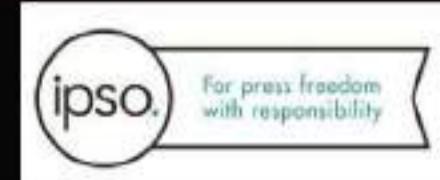
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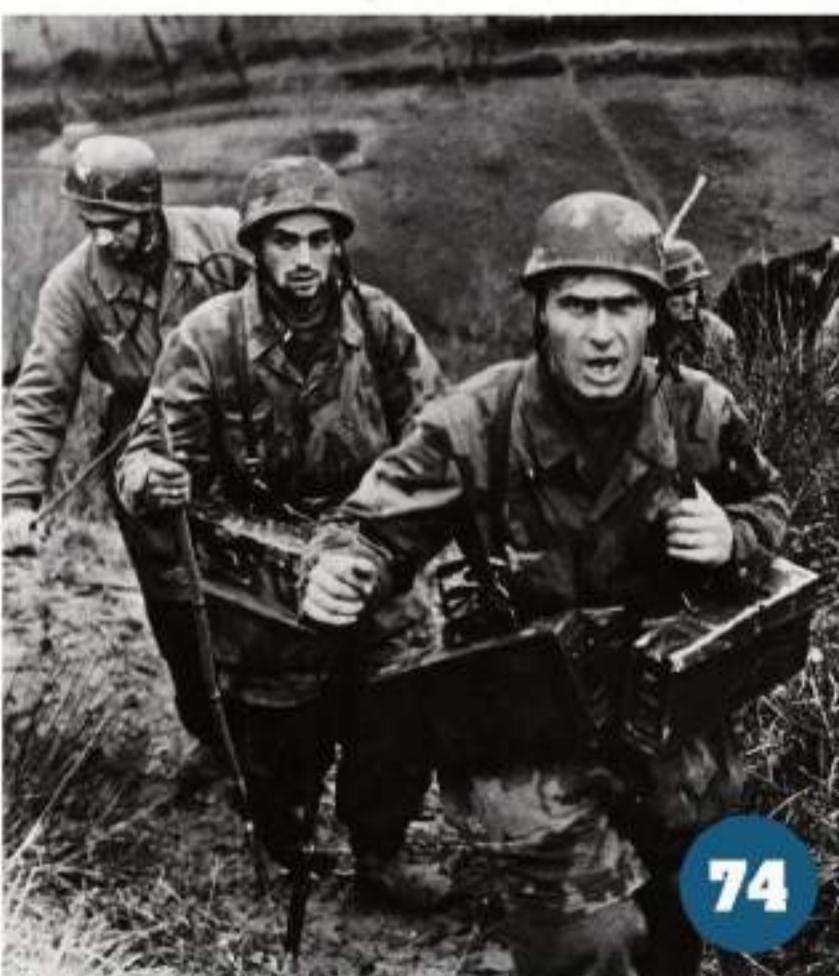
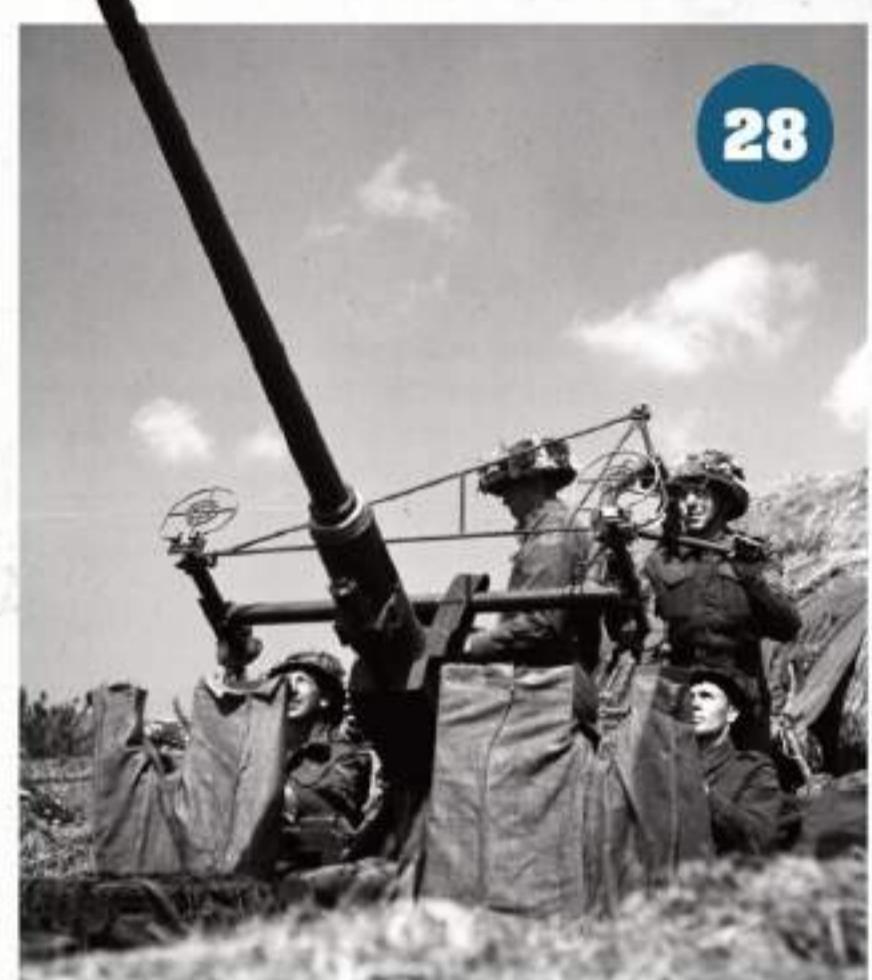
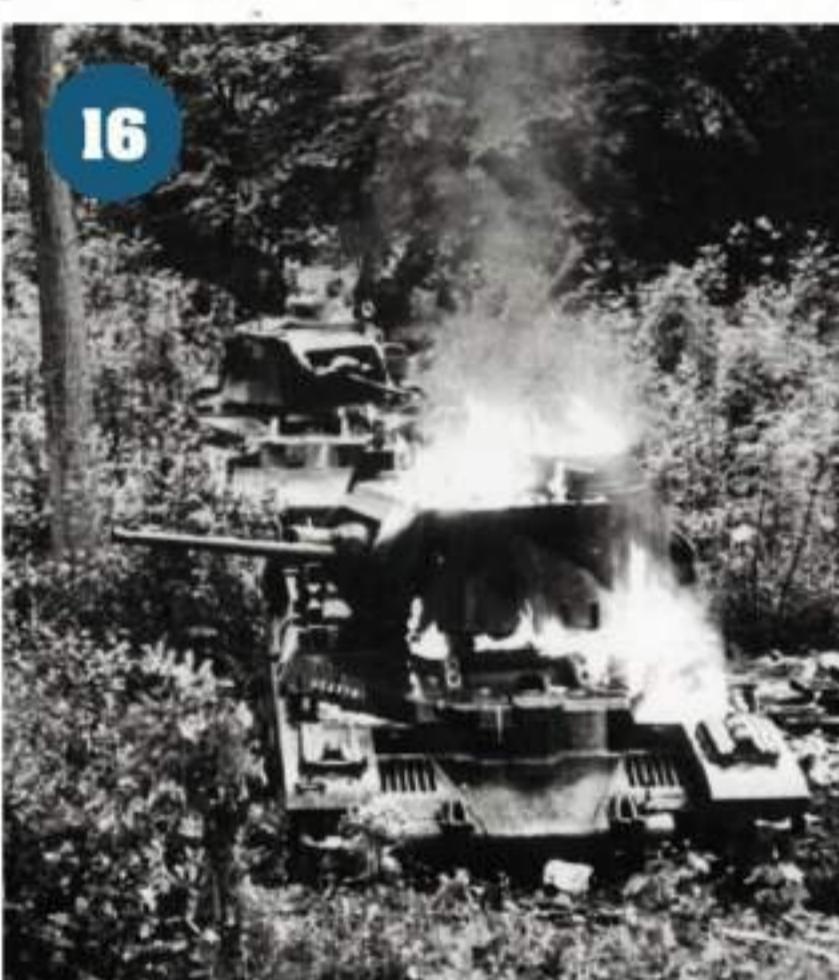
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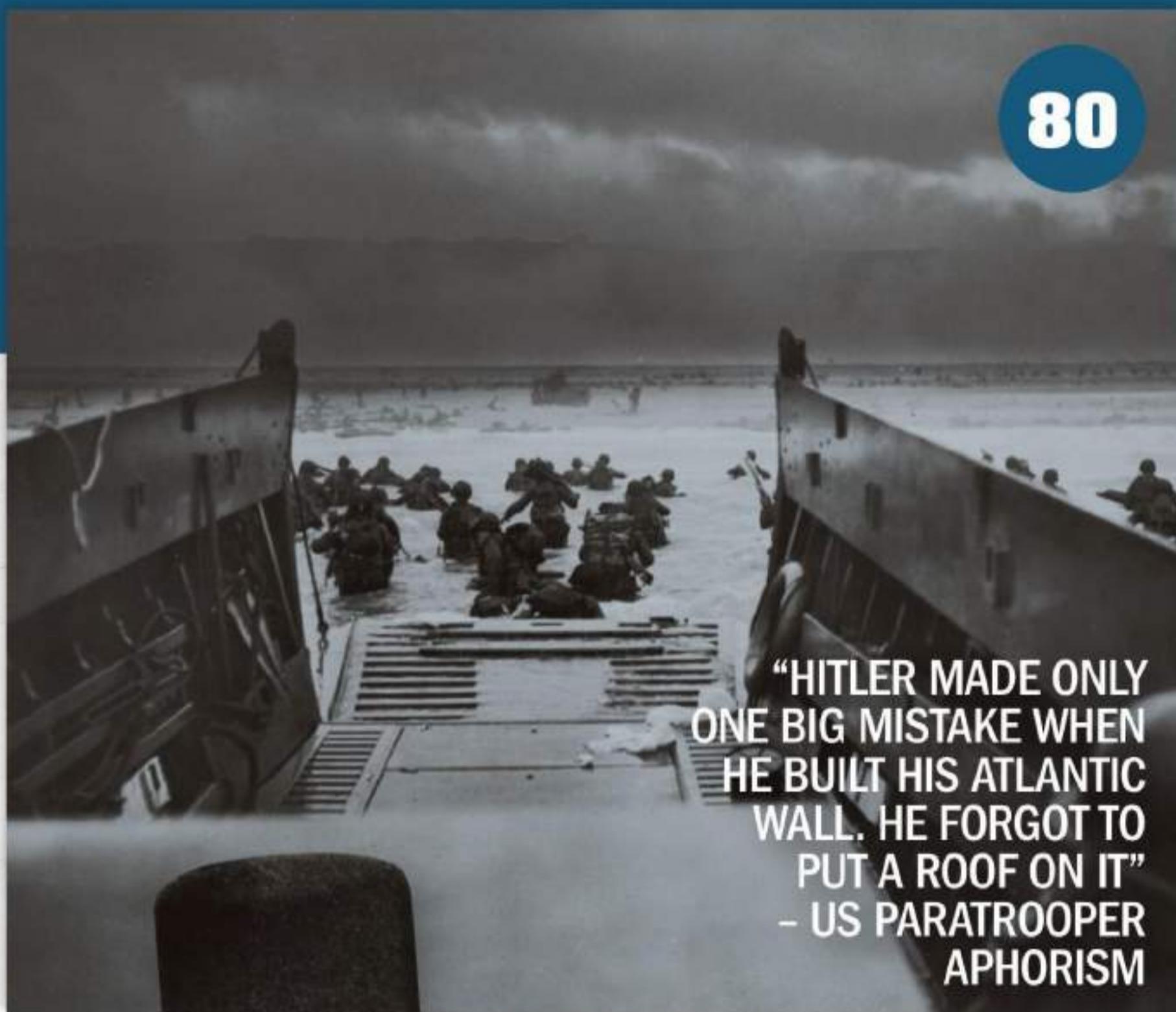
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"WHAT IS OUR AIM? VICTORY. VICTORY AT ALL COSTS, VICTORY IN SPITE OF ALL THE HORROR, VICTORY HOWEVER LONG AND HARD THE ROAD MAY BE; FOR WITHOUT VICTORY THERE IS NO SURVIVAL" – WINSTON CHURCHILL, 13 MAY 1940





"HITLER MADE ONLY ONE BIG MISTAKE WHEN HE BUILT HIS ATLANTIC WALL. HE FORGOT TO PUT A ROOF ON IT"
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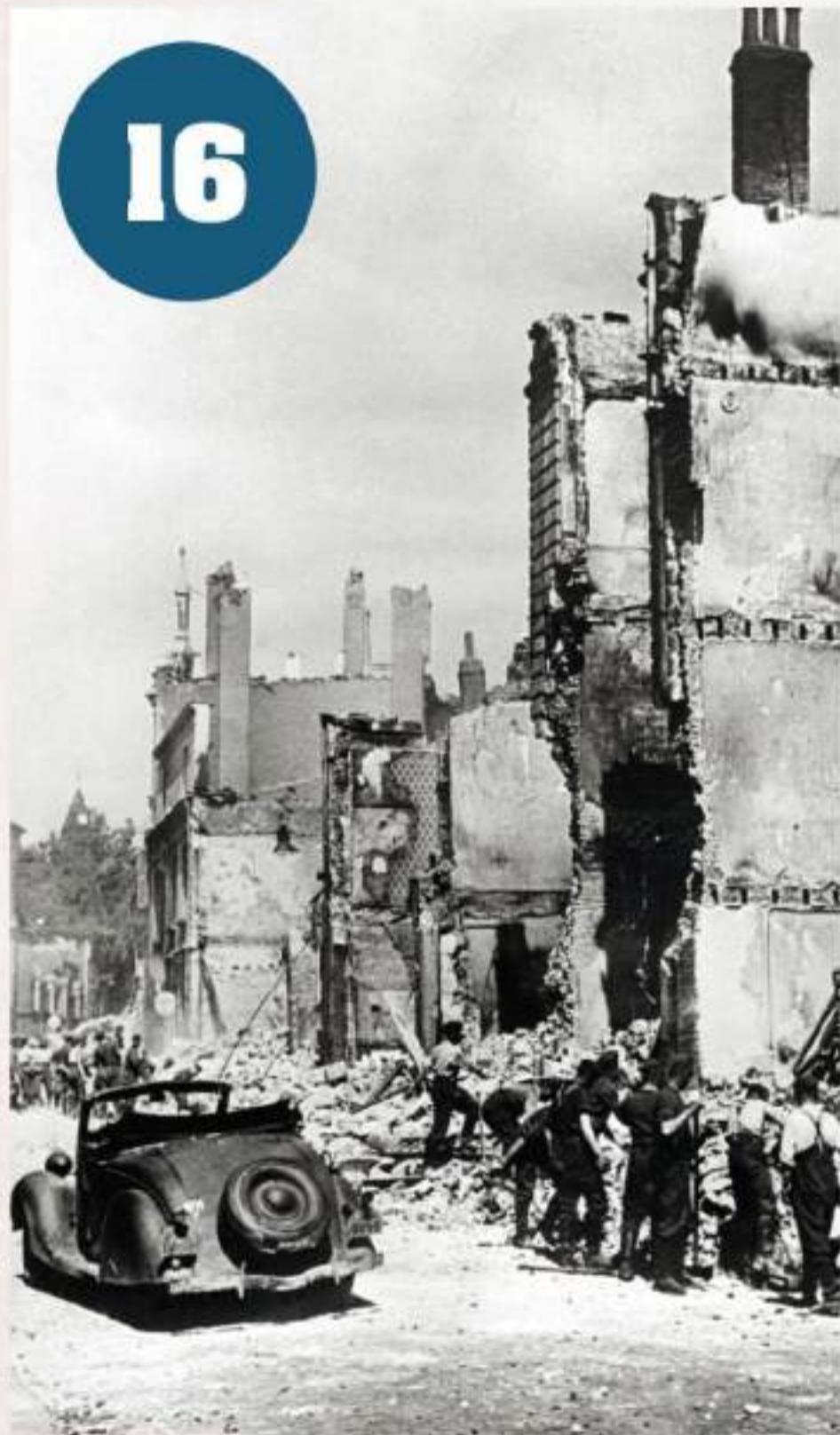
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Images: Getty Images



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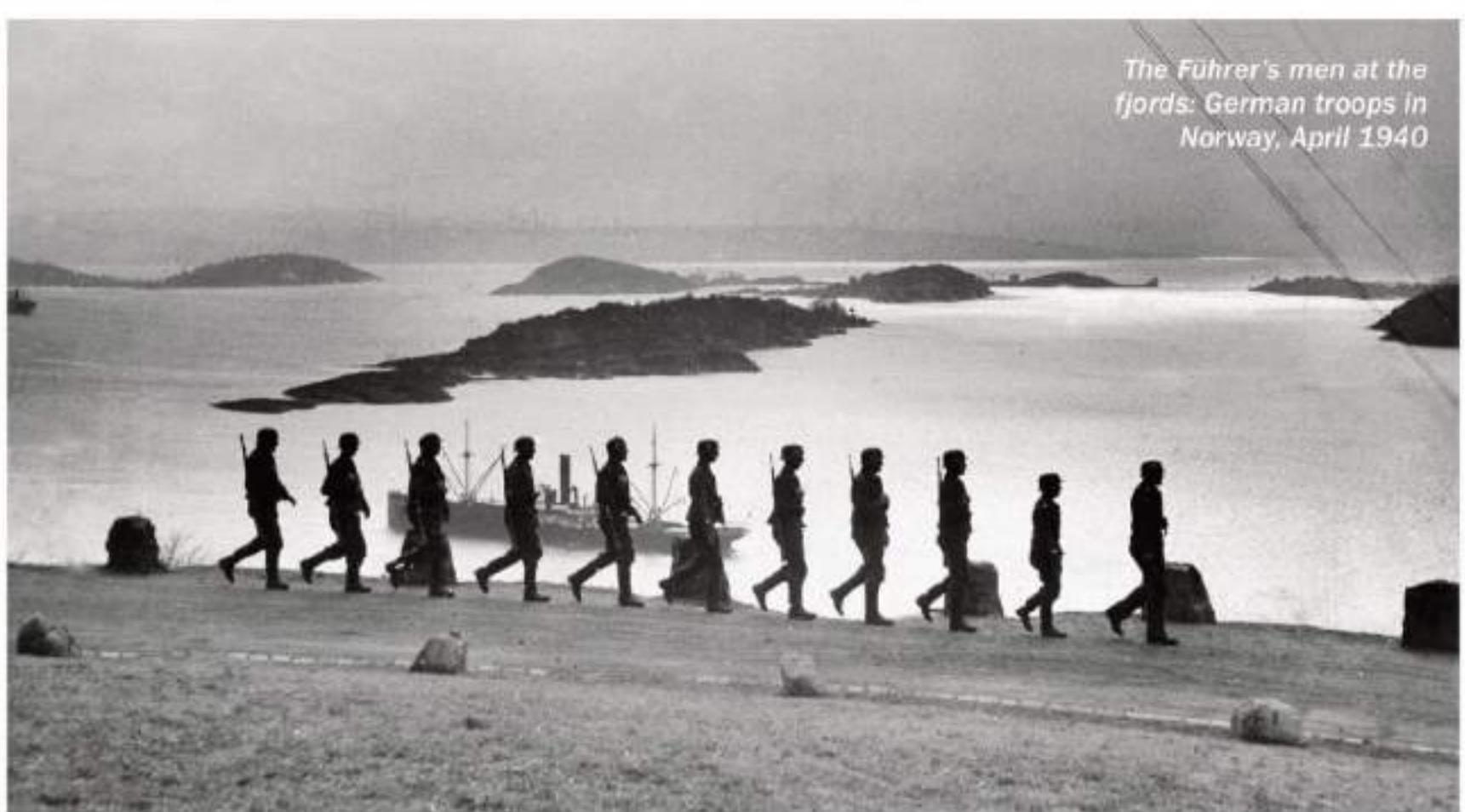
THE

WEHRMACHT UNLEASHED

When the 'Phoney War' finally ended unluckily situated
neutral countries found themselves steamrollered

WORDS SEAN EGAN





At approximately 1.30 a.m. on the morning of 9 April 1940, Haakon VII, King of Norway, was awoken by an aide to be given the grave news that his country was at war. "With whom?" he asked.

It was more than grogginess that inspired the question. Although Norway had decided to remain neutral in the new great war, there had lately been rumblings from both Allied and Axis powers to the effect that they could not afford to continue to respect the country's sovereignty. In the last 24 hours, both British and German ships had moved without permission into Norwegian waters.

Norway had the misfortune to be so geographically located as to be of vital strategic importance to the war's opposing actors. Herr Hitler cared little about conquering this little frozen nation of fewer than 3 million people but was painfully aware that it potentially stood between Germany and the iron ore on which it depended heavily.

In 1938, the mineral had been imported into Germany to the tune of 22 million tons. However, immediately upon Britain's declaration of war on Germany, an Allied naval blockade had been imposed. Germany could still obtain the resource from neutral Sweden, but the blockade had seen its supply plunge by 9.5 million tons. As iron ore was vital for the creation of steel and the manufacture of weapons, securing its continued availability was vital to Germany's war machine.

Ore was shipped from Kiruna and Gällivare in Sweden's far north through the Norwegian port of Narvik and the Swedish port of Luleå. In winter, the Luleå passage (through the Gulf of Bothnia that separates Sweden and Finland) was rendered impassable by ice, which meant that in those months the iron shipments to Germany could be choked off by being intercepted down the west coast of Norway by the formidably large Royal Navy. Something else that had occurred to German military minds was the fact that, were Germany to occupy Norway, it would provide the opportunity to set up bases from which attacks on British shipping could be mounted.

Denmark, another neutral country, had a population of under 4 million and was just as uninteresting to a Führer primarily motivated by a desire to put right the perceived wrongs of the Treaty of Versailles. However, Denmark's position across the North Sea below Norway made that country of strategic importance too: Danish air bases and control of its waters could be used to subjugate Norway.

The impetus for Hitler to make his move in the region was partly an occurrence on 17 February

The Germans advance into southern Norway, April 1940

"DENMARK'S POSITION ACROSS THE NORTH SEA BELOW NORWAY MADE THAT COUNTRY OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE TOO: DANISH AIR BASES AND CONTROL OF ITS WATERS COULD BE USED TO SUBJUGATE NORWAY"

1940. Britain caused a minor diplomatic incident by boarding the German tanker Altmark in Norwegian waters. A few days later, the Führer called in General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst. Hitler knew that the army commander had served in Finland in 1918, adjacent to Norway. That the Führer then promptly gave von Falkenhorst the role of commander of what was dubbed Operation Weserübung is a symptom of the ad hoc nature of the campaign that followed. The stunned von Falkenhorst went out and bought a Baedeker travel guide and plotted the assault on Norway from the information he gleaned from its pages. Symptomatic of the way Germany blundered into good luck during Weserübung is the fact that the plans he drew up pretty much coincided with those devised by the vastly better-informed High Command of the Wehrmacht.

Some high-ranking German armed forces personnel considered attacking Norway and Denmark at this particular juncture to be the height of folly. Not least of these people was commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe, and second-in-command to the Führer, Hermann Göring. The latter's belief was that the plan was a pointless diversion of resources that jeopardised the success of the Western offensive and that a more opportune moment to attack Norway and Denmark would come when Allied soldiers were preoccupied defending France, the major country on Germany's current hit list. Göring's contempt for the plan was shot through with fury that he had not been consulted about it. Not many people had the

gumption to stand up to Hitler in his pomp but, at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin on 5 March, Göring did precisely that, refusing to place the air force at von Falkenhorst's disposal. No terrible retribution followed, although Hitler did exclude Göring from further Weserübung strategy meetings. Weserübung would formally begin on Tuesday 9 April 1940 at 5.15 a.m.

Accordingly, on 7 April, a large German formation was steaming north through the Baltic Sea, accompanied by a unit of the Luftwaffe. Naturally, such a large convoy wasn't going to go unnoticed. When it was spotted by Royal Air Force reconnaissance planes, 30 British bombers were dispatched to deal with it, even if the British military had no idea where the ships were headed. Unfortunately, all of the RAF's explosive cargo splashed harmlessly into the sea.

Quite extraordinarily, Britain and Germany put into action a Norwegian plan to commence at the same time, and both countries remained ignorant of the other's schemes until the last moment. In early 1940, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, had been petitioning Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to mine Norway's coastal waters, a move that would confront German sea captains with the dilemma of being holed or retreating to sea, where Royal Navy gunboats would be waiting for them. Churchill had finally got his way in April with the launch of Operation Wilfred.

The Allied and Axis operations intersected on the morning of 8 April when HMS Glowworm encountered Admiral Hipper, a German heavy

A military band plays in front of the Storting (Parliament) after German troops enter Oslo, 10 April



Neutrality? What neutrality?

In the chaos of war, it wasn't only the Axis that showed contempt for sovereignty

Ruthless disregard for neutrality was not the exclusive province of the Axis powers. Chief of Britain's Imperial Staff, General Edmund 'Tiny' Ironside, proposed exploiting a French plan to provide aid to Finland as a cover for a British invasion of Norway and Sweden

with the objective of securing Swedish iron mines. This option was considered as early as January of 1940, but practicalities – and one hopes a sense of morality – saw it repeatedly parked.

The dangers brought home by the Altmark incident put a stop to the

prevarication for a while. The French and the British agreed a joint operation involving the seizure of Swedish iron mines and the occupation of Norwegian ports, with Britain pledging 100,000 troops. However, the diversion of such manpower to arctic conditions for which

the equipment simply wasn't available was never contemplated with much enthusiasm. The news on 13 March of the Finland-Russia armistice ended the operation.

However, by April 1940 it was back on again. Sort of. 'R 4' was a plan to send British troops to Narvik in the event of the Germans invading Norway or looking like they were about to. The men were to be transported once Churchill's longed-for Norwegian minelaying operation began. In the event, only the plan's mining element went ahead because, by the time it did, Germany was well on its way to conquering Norway. Who knows how history might have differed if that early – if hardly ethical – plan to cut off iron ore to Germany had been carried out?



Winston Churchill addresses the crew of HMS Hardy, sunk at Narvik



"QUITE EXTRAORDINARILY, BRITAIN AND GERMANY PUT INTO ACTION A NORWEGIAN PLAN TO COMMENCE AT THE SAME TIME, AND BOTH COUNTRIES REMAINED IGNORANT OF THE OTHER'S SCHEMES UNTIL THE LAST MOMENT"

crusher, and four accompanying destroyers. Almost farcically, Glowworm – part of the minelaying ship detail – had only remained in these waters to search for a sailor lost overboard. It couldn't outrun or outgun the Axis ships and eventually it was on fire and sinking. With nothing to lose, its captain ordered that the ship ram the Hipper. Glowworm exploded and all but 38 of its crew perished, but its battering tactic deprived the German ship of 40 metres of armour and torpedo tubes.

Britain scored some early triumphs. With the British now knowing what the Germans were up to, battlecruiser HMS Renown was ordered along with nine destroyers to prevent any German seacraft reaching Narvik. On the morning of 9 April, when the British vessels spotted German battleships Gneisenau and Scharnhorst and their attendant destroyers, the air was filled with the boomerang of heavy artillery. Gneisenau sustained irrevocable damage to its fire support system and the German ships turned away.

Meanwhile, the German assault on Oslo did not start well. The Blücher – not only brand new but one of only five heavy cruisers in the Kriegsmarine – was sunk by Norwegian shore batteries with the death of one-fifth of its 1,600-strong crew. All, however, were Pyrrhic victories for the Allies.

Partly this was because of the concentration of resources. Operation Weserübung involved all components of the Wehrmacht. Almost the whole of Germany's navy was deployed, with six task forces allocated to Norway, five to Denmark, and every single one of the country's 39 U-boats made available. A 1,200-craft air corps was called into service. On the ground, 120,000 troops were instructed to prepare to march, with 30,000 troops alone constituting the first wave. There were also dirty tricks: merchant ships docked in Norwegian ports turned out to be holding hidden cargo of arms and ammunition.

Not that things always went exactly to plan. The taking of Norway's Fornebu airfield was meant to involve an airborne drop, then novel in warfare, but the initial paratroop force got lost in fog. Nor was there any sign of ground troops when 1. Staffel arrived to provide cover and attack ground targets. Short of fuel and being strafed by the airfield's

defences, the leader of the Luftwaffe aircraft decided to launch the operation himself. The battle was short-lived. When a German plane crash-landed, its pilot was approached by a Norwegian airman who curiously greeted him with a 'Heil Hitler'. The airfield was in German control even before 50-plus German Ju52 transport planes shortly arrived.

The Germans met somewhat stiffer resistance elsewhere. Shore gunners, Oslofjord warships and the Norwegian Air Force were never going to be able to stand in the way of the overwhelming numerical superiority of the German war machine, but they resisted the invaders long enough to enable the king and his government to escape, taking the country's gold reserves with them.

By nightfall of the 9th, though, another airborne drop had seen the capture of Stavanger Airport. Also seized were the cities of Kristiansand, Bergen and Trondheim. Meanwhile, ten German destroyers had evaded the Royal Navy to successfully convey to Narvik the German 3rd Mountain Division led by General Eduard Dietl. Resistance to the invader didn't formally end until 10 June, but well before then the bulk of Norway was essentially under the command of Germany.

Over in Denmark, resistance was negligible. King Christian X concluded that Denmark's 14,000-man army could not possibly repel the invaders and that any fighting would only result in futile bloodshed. Sporadic unauthorised battles on the streets did not change matters, and the two-hour interval between Germany's invasion and Denmark's surrender is widely considered to be the fastest conquest of a country ever seen.

Germany could now turn its attention to the so-called Low Countries – Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg – whose invasion Hitler had actually been contemplating first before the gravity of the iron supply situation fully dawned. Again, these were neutral countries that had the misfortune to be geographically important to Hitler's true objectives.

The border between Germany and France was fully 280 miles long, but simply pouring across it was impossible because of the Maginot Line. Constructed by France between 1929 and 1938, it was a formidable series of pillboxes, guns and barriers specifically designed to stem German aggression. That it worked perfectly was somewhat to the Low Countries' misfortune. The easiest way for Germany to attack France now was to march through its neighbours.

On 10 May 1940, 'Case Yellow' was put into operation. The assault Germany launched on the 'Benelux' was three-pronged; such an audacious operation was heavily dependent on speed and surprise. Germany achieved the latter by keeping

"THEY RESISTED THE INVADERS LONG ENOUGH TO ENABLE THE KING AND HIS GOVERNMENT TO ESCAPE, TAKING THE COUNTRY'S GOLD RESERVES WITH THEM"





troops ostentatiously stationed at the Maginot Line, thus ensuring France dared not move too many of its soldiers from there. Additionally, it made unprecedented use of aerial attacks (including the dreaded Stuka dive-bombers) and fooled the Allies into believing that the thrust by Armeegruppe B into Holland and Belgium was the main attack. The Germans were also assisted by the Dutch army's under-resourced and battle-rusty status and by the unexpected occurrence of fleeing civilians clogging Belgium's roads.

Moreover, the parliamentary crisis in Britain, where Chamberlain had two days previously been bitterly attacked by a mutinous House of Commons over his handling of the war, was a distraction at just the wrong time – even if it did lead on 10 May to the fateful installation of Winston Churchill as Prime Minister. Tiny Luxembourg (population: 296,000) surrendered immediately. Shocked by the 'Rotterdam Blitz' of 14 May – in which acres of centuries-old buildings were decimated and nearly 1,000 people killed – and under threat of more of the same, the Netherlands capitulated on 15 May. Belgium yielded on 28 May.

The entire world was glumly aware of the fact that Germany, from a standing start eight months previously, now effectively had possession of fully half a dozen countries, while Case Yellow's pincer movement had yielded it a large chunk of the land of the tricolore. The Phoney War was over. However, Germany had received the Soviets' help with invading Poland and had enjoyed numerical superiority and good fortune when conquering other nations. The real test of its mettle would be that country containing the city that had given its name to the hated Treaty of Versailles. The world turned its anxious eyes on France.

Quisling: The immortal mediocrity

He wanted to be his country's Führer but ended up a pejorative dictionary definition

To this day, some are convinced that Hitler's surprise decision to invade Norway was down to a meeting he had with Vidkun Quisling, leader of the Nasjonal Samling, Norway's Fascist party.

The meeting was arranged by Admiral Raeder, commander-in-chief of the Kriegsmarine, who was a proponent of the idea of seizing Norway's coastline at a point when Hitler was still minded to respect Norwegian neutrality. Quisling (born 1887) met with Nazi intelligence officers at the end of March 1940 and provided them information on Norwegian defences. Operation Weserübung formally began three days after Quisling's arrival back in Norway.

Quisling attempted to capitalise on the invasion of his country. However, his would-be coup d'état

– using the then cutting-edge method of a radio broadcast – was a farcical failure when it was essentially stalled or ignored by the relevant parties. In 1942, though, he was rewarded by the Germans for his cooperation by being installed as the head of occupied Norway's government, even if his powers and position were ambiguous and limited. He held the post until the regime's 1945 surrender to the Allies. Like so many Nazi lackeys, he was executed at war's end, but he has achieved a curious immortality at odds with the fact that, despite being a one-time defence minister, he had otherwise been a rather obscure politician. The word 'Quisling' is now defined by dictionaries as 'a person who helps an enemy that has taken control of his or her country'.



Hitler meets the man whose name is now synonymous with treachery



PANZER INVASION

David Willey, Curator of the Tank Museum, reveals the extraordinary story of how outnumbered German armoured forces successfully spearheaded the invasion of France 80 years ago

WORDS TOM GARNER

Source: Wiki / Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-H29708 / CC BY-SA 3.0 DE



Adolf Hitler and his entourage visit the Eiffel Tower in Paris on 23 June 1940 following the occupation of France by Nazi Germany



German soldiers marching past the Arc de Triomphe after the surrender of Paris, 14 June 1940

Source: Wiki / Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1994-036-09A / CC BY-SA



David Willey is the curator of the Tank Museum and the host of the YouTube series 'Curator at Home'



© Alamy

In May 1940, the world turned upside-down when Nazi Germany launched a campaign in Western Europe against the Low Countries, and most critically, France. Then a major power with a large colonial empire, France had a huge number of armed forces at its disposal. With extensive support from the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and formidable border defences, it was entirely possible that the Germans' expansion would be stopped in the West.

Nevertheless, in a brief six-week campaign from 10 May 1940, France, Belgium and the Netherlands fell in one of the most dramatic, audacious campaigns in military history. Characterised by rapid 'blitzkrieg' warfare, the German victory was largely due to how it deployed its armoured forces.

Tanks played a vital role in this campaign, where speed and mobility counted more than armoured engagements. The fall of France in particular was a watershed moment that left Britain almost without allies and destroyed the Third French Republic. In armoured terms, the Germans had achieved this with just a few Panzer divisions, highlighting the importance of tanks like never before.

However, the famous images of Panzers rolling through the French countryside towards a seemingly inevitable victory are actually misleading. David Willey, curator of the Tank Museum, explains that Germany's armoured success in France was by no means guaranteed. He discusses how unprepared the German tank force was and why the Panzers' achievements in May 1940 set in motion the process of the Nazis' final defeat.

Development

During the interwar period Germany conducted a series of programmes to experiment with armour. "Germany had only built 20 tanks during WWI," Willey explains. "Although the tank had not been a massive success, there was a perception in the military that it had partially influenced Germany to sue for an armistice. This had a huge psychological impact, so the commander of the Reichswehr, Hans von Seeckt, started an investigation into why they lost and how they would do it better next time."

"The Germans performed exercises during the 1920s-30s and learned that motorised

mechanisation was effective in war games. Before Hitler came to power [in January 1933] the Germans had experimented with the Russians on secret tracked vehicles and in 1933 he pushed design work forward."

The manufacture of 'Panzer' (the German word for 'tank') armoured vehicles ensued although they were not a priority for the Nazis' rearmament programme. "The Germans had major problems with their tank development. They were looking at mobile, armoured warfare but it was a tiny part of the greater German military that was forming. For example, Hitler's production priority in October 1939 was ammunition and submarines, with tanks only being about third on the list. As a WWI soldier, he envisaged the Western campaign as a slog to smash through the Maginot Line and saw artillery ammunition as the priority."

When war broke out, the Panzers were underprepared. "They built many more Panzer IIs and IIs than they wanted because the Panzer III and IV were not ready. The Panzer I and II were designed to fight but they were essentially training tanks, whereas the Panzer III and IV were definitively built for combat operations." Additionally, the German doctrine for tank warfare was limited. "The tank commanders wanted to expand their Panzer divisions but the kit wasn't available. There was also the wider idea of using the tank as a support weapon for infantry attacks, which was the received wisdom in most European armies."

Despite the limitations, the success of the invasion of Poland encouraged the Germans to turn their attention west.

The Manstein Plan

The initial plan for the invasion of France was called 'Case Yellow' and centred around an unimaginative attack with a traditional advance into Belgium, the idea being to capture as much of the Belgian and northern French coast as possible. "It was similar to the weaker 'Schlieffen Plan' of WWI but it was unclear that it would lead to a strategic outcome. Manstein had a very different plan, and although the German High Command objected, a meeting was arranged between Manstein and Adolf Hitler. Hitler was captivated and called for a new version

of 'Case Yellow'. What became known as the 'Manstein Plan' was a daring idea of speed with Panzers at the forefront.

"In the north, there were 29 divisions of Army Group B that would go into the Low Countries with three Panzer divisions. Below them was Army Group A, which was the more powerful force of 48 divisions, including seven Panzer divisions. Group B would draw the main mobile force of 60 Allied divisions into the Low Countries. Meanwhile, Group A further south would go through the relatively undefended Ardennes with the larger force and only meet 18 French and Belgian divisions."

Once Army Group A entered France, the Panzers would be critical. "Manstein argued to Hitler that those seven Panzer divisions would go through the Ardennes followed by the infantry. If they then rushed for the coast they could cut off the Allied force moving into Belgium in a massive pocket and potentially gain a strategic outcome. In other words, this was a war-winner rather than just capturing ground and perhaps a negotiated peace deal."

Although Manstein's plan met with enthusiasm from Hitler, there were reservations from within German High Command. Ironically, this disagreement aided Manstein's idea. "Hitler bought into the plan and contributed his own thoughts about the Ardennes, which is why the 1940 campaign happened in the way that it did. However, it was risky and the High Command delayed an attack in the West 29 times because they knew they were not ready. This delay worked for the German military, because by May 1940 they had assembled hundreds more tanks."

"The tip of the spear"

Despite the audaciousness of Manstein's plan, the German army – and particularly its armoured force – was ill-prepared to invade the West. "When you look at the scale of the German tanks compared to the rest of the German military in 1940, it was tiny – 157 divisions were ready for the invasion but only 16 were motorised and just ten were Panzer divisions. The nature of the army was also striking; 45 percent of the men were over 40 years old and 50 per cent only had a few weeks training. Fuel was so short that a de-motorisation programme was



Erich von Manstein's eponymous plan was a daring strategic masterstroke that utilised armoured speed to defeat the Allies in the West



As well as commanding German armoured forces through the Ardennes, Heinz Guderian went on to lead the 2nd Panzer Army during Operation Barbarossa



The invasion of France made the reputation of Erwin Rommel as a formidable commander. He is seen here in the aftermath of the German victory in June 1940



enforced, with vehicles being replaced with horses before the attack. The Panzers were regarded as the tip of the spear, but many tend to ignore the less-mobile troops coming on behind."

The Germans were also outnumbered by the Allies. "There were 135 German divisions earmarked for the invasion against 151 Allied divisions, 117 of which were French. The Allies had double the artillery and 4,204 tanks compared to the Germans, who had just over 2,400." They would also have to contend with superior French armour.

"The Panzer IV's thickest armour was 30mm compared to the Char B1, which was 60mm. The Char B1 and SOMUA S35 both had 47mm guns that could penetrate 80mm armour at approximately 150 metres. The German tanks were outgunned, with the Panzer II only being able to penetrate 64mm at around 100 metres."

On the eve of the invasion the French were in a seemingly better position, but they had a different attitude towards armoured warfare.

"If you lined up the French tanks in terms of quality and numbers they were better than the Germans. The French had endured WWI, were on the winning side and had a formula called 'Methodical Battle'. This meant preparation, simple tactics and great use of artillery. The tank was a weapon of exploitation, but artillery came first. Tanks played a small but growing part in their planning. They had also built the Maginot Line, so they had a static mentality.

"It was only very late in the 1930s that they started thinking that a mobile, armoured division was sensible. With the French, it's important to consider their mental outlook. When the campaign began they were mentally prepared for a WWI-type

encounter. They saw a struggle that would run into months or years ahead, but they were preparing for the wrong war. Who could predict the shock German attack of four days breaking through and a six-week campaign compared to four years of what was effectively siege warfare? To us, with hindsight, it seems ridiculous because their strategy failed abysmally, but for them and many others it was very sensible at the time."

Invasion

On 10 May 1940, the Germans attacked the Netherlands and Belgium, which prompted a French-British advance into Belgium, as had been predicted by Manstein. On 12 May, the first German forces emerged from the Ardennes forest at Sedan in northeast France, with the Panzers leading the way. This was a daring success borne from logistical difficulty.

"The Panzers' conundrum was how to get through the Ardennes, which is notoriously hilly with tight roads and bends. Their problems came down to, 'If one tank gets stuck, how do we fix that?'"

"THE FRENCH WERE PREPARING FOR THE WRONG WAR. WHO COULD PREDICT THE SHOCK GERMAN ATTACK AND A SIX-WEEK CAMPAIGN COMPARED TO FOUR YEARS OF WHAT WAS EFFECTIVELY SIEGE WARFARE?"

The breakthrough for the Germans occurred at the Second Battle of Sedan, which was fought on 12–15 May 1940. "Hitler called it a 'miracle' and the Panzers got across the River Meuse where the French defences were not that strong. French forces pulled back from the Meuse even before the tanks had actually crossed. That sense of panic engendered within the French forces caused a swift and massive collapse. The victory at Sedan released the tanks."

The Panzers' objective was to now race to the Channel ports on the northern French coast, which was an ambitious manoeuvre. "Most Panzer divisions carried up to four days' fuel and their own supplies with them. However, the logistical train was problematic. Fuel was the Panzer's lifeblood because without it a tank was just a pillbox. Heinz Guderian [commander of Army Group A's armoured force] sent motorcycle combinations ahead to capture petrol stations. They would also round up local Michelin maps so they knew where to go."

Key to the Panzers' speed was operating independently. "The Panzers knew their role was not to support beleaguered infantry units. They needed to be resupplied, but the novelty was that they were trying to be independent. Other units were integral, such as engineers, artillery and infantry, but the Panzers took them along. They were given licence to be untied to the coattails of the army that was advancing at foot-pace miles behind them."

This independence was suited to a favourable landscape. "Most of northern France is relatively flat compared to the Ardennes. After gathering fuel, the next important thing was to capture bridges. The Germans followed the Somme Valley at one

Adolf Hitler pictured in Paris with Albert Speer (left) and Arno Breker, 23 June 1940. The success of the Panzers during the invasion was assisted by his support of the Manstein Plan



point, and river crossings were a problem. Guderian told the troops that you didn't have to repair a bridge or perform a river assault if you managed to get there before the French. It was all about speed and momentum."

This swift advance largely prevented actual tank engagements. "There weren't that many battles because the Panzer troops were told, 'If you meet any tanks, go around them.' They were conscious that their own tanks were not of the same quality and used [their] mobility rather than firepower.

"Where they did engage with French armoured forces, such as the battles of Hannut and Stonne, the Germans didn't do well, because the French tanks were a significant fighting force. However, the French efforts were dissipated and tanks constantly moved about to potential defensive positions. The Germans instead used their speed to rush French positions and were usually successful."

Guderian, Rommel and De Gaulle

Heinz Guderian and Erwin Rommel became the most famous tank commanders of the invasion. Guderian was a key Panzer commander, but Willey argues that his reputation is complicated.

"Guderian was the executioner of Manstein's plan and had great influence on the battle, but you have to take his role with a pinch of salt. Manstein was responsible for the strategy, but Guderian became a pin-up of the German military. There were other commanders who were just as prominent in terms of 1930s armour development, but it was Guderian who wrote his memoirs, in which he was a bit self-serving."

The invasion also made the reputation of Erwin Rommel, commander of 7th Panzer Division. "Like



Maurice Gamelin was the first commander-in-chief of French forces before he was sacked on 19 May 1940 and replaced by Maxime Weygand

Guderian, Rommel saw the advantage of speed and mobility at ground level, because his division were capturing everything without a fight. His tanks drove past French units who were setting up for lunch and didn't know the Germans were there. At another point, French tanks lined up waiting to refuel before forming a defensive line when the 7th Panzers turned up, completely unexpected."

Rommel's rapport with his troops also increased his popularity. "He was very hands-on with the men and kept up in his half-track and aeroplane. His constant emphasis was to keep moving because he understood Manstein's strategy. He certainly became the poster-boy for the Nazis after the campaign. Of course, every military force tells white

lies to increase their reputation, but even without the exaggerations Rommel was an absolutely brilliant armoured general."

On the other side, French tank commanders like Charles de Gaulle of 4th Armoured Division were given little chance to succeed. "De Gaulle was put in charge of an armoured force south of the German breakthrough. He attempted an attack as part of a larger pincer movement but it was aborted and didn't happen in the way he wanted. He had the problem of the cascading effect of failure and confusion from the French High Command. Although De Gaulle didn't come out badly, he didn't have much opportunity to shine."

An extended tortoise

The tragedy for France was that the courage of its soldiers was not matched by their leaders.

"There is a lot of nonsense about French soldiers being cowards or crass jokes that their tanks had five reverse gears. The French were really let down by their command. Where they could fight, they fought supremely bravely. You only have to go on battlefield tours to find pillboxes around Sedan etc. They invariably have plaques that commemorate soldiers who fought until they ran out of ammunition and were killed. That lie about their courage shouldn't be allowed."

One example of the French High Command's failure was a missed opportunity to cut off the Panzer advance. "The Panzers made it to the coast on 19 May. The northern Allied armies were now in a pocket about 200 kilometres long and 140 kilometres deep against the coast. As early as 15 May, the French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, told Winston Churchill, 'We are defeated'. However, on 19 May, Churchill pointed out to the French



German tanks enter a ruined French town, June 1940

© Getty



Source: Wiki / PD Gov



Although Charles de Gaulle was given little chance to prove his worth as a tank commander he swiftly found a new role as the leader of Free French forces

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Guderian is pictured directing armoured operations from a half-track, May 1940



General Walter von Reichenau inspects a Char B1, June 1940

Source: Wiki / PD Gov

Commander-in-Chief, Maurice Gamelin, 'The tortoise has extended its head.' In other words, the Allies could cut off the Panzer advance on the coast and cause real problems with a pincer attack."

Gamelin followed this advice but the Allied plan was internally thwarted. "Gamelin issued 'Directive Number 12' on 19 May for an Allied pinch attack. However, he was sacked that day and replaced by Maxime Weygand, who cancelled it. Weygand then

wasted three days by visiting politicians, conducting a fact-finding mission and flying into the Allied pocket to have discussions with 1st Army Group Commander Gaston Billotte. He had to fly back via a tortuous route and achieved nothing."

Billotte was killed in a car crash on 21 May while Weygand belatedly reinstated Directive Number 12 before finally cancelling it on 27 May. Willey is critical of how a potentially good idea to

stop the Panzers was squandered. "The idea of a major pinching-off attack was there but mistakes occurred in so many different ways that it led to a wasted opportunity. This paralysis, lack of leadership and failure to understand at the top reflects the WWI thinking. Weygand thought he had time but he hadn't. It's very problematic because so many French soldiers were bravely doing exactly what they were told and getting massacred."

"24 hours that saved Europe"

The Battle of Arras was a forgotten tank engagement that inadvertently changed the course of WWII

As German forces advanced, the British-held supply base at Arras was in danger of being surrounded. On 21 May 1940, the British launched a counterattack with just 2,000 infantrymen and 74 tanks. David Willey explains.

"General Harold Franklyn was in charge when Rommel's 7th Panzer Division passed south of Arras. He was ordered by Lord Gort to cut off the German advance to give Arras breathing space. Most of the British forces were in Belgium and they couldn't risk a major rear base being cut off. Franklyn ordered an attack with his available forces. British tanks in Belgium were rushed back."

"Tanks were usually transported by train, but they had to drive back. They were worn out when they arrived on the night of 20 May below Vimy Ridge. Giffard Le

Quesne Martel was put in charge with soldiers from the Durham Light Infantry, who were put in a battalion each with the 4th and 7th Royal Tank Regiments. He also had artillery and anti-tank guns to make a two-pronged attack across the 7th Panzers' line. There was no time for prior reconnaissance or even an orders group. It was very ad-hoc but it was inevitable because of the situation." Primarily using Matilda tanks, the British ran into the Germans.

"The nearby French tried to help but they accidentally fired on their allies. However, the British drove through the 7th Panzers' infantry regiment, who were behind Rommel. It caused mayhem and Rommel had to come back to regain control. He created a line of flak guns and artillery and ordered everything fired at the British." The British also startled an SS division,

"The Matildas had thick armour so the standard German anti-tank rounds bounced off. The battle really had an effect because the British got through the Panzers. They then encountered the Totenkopf SS Division, which was passing further south. The SS fled and later the Wehrmacht gleefully reported how they panicked. The initial success of the attack was a moment of elation for the British." The success didn't last.

"They then came up against better-defended German gun lines set up by Rommel and only 20 British tanks of 80 made it back. By the end of the day, as the British retreated back towards Vimy Ridge, Rommel called in the Stukas." Nevertheless, the attack sent shockwaves up the chain of command, "Rommel had radioed back saying they were attacked by hundreds of tanks and Hitler feared that they would be cut off and lose at the last moment. Ewald von Kleist called the Arras attack "a serious threat" and Hitler ordered Wilhelm Keitel to the front and halted the Panzers for 24 hours on 22 May."

Willey believes the Battle of Arras had profound implications. "It was

so strategically important that one historian described it as, '24 hours that saved Europe'. The Panzers were on target to capture the Channel ports but because of the 24-hour delay they couldn't move until midnight on 22 May. In that time, the British reinforced three ports. Boulogne and Calais fell in a few days, but Dunkirk was held until 4 June, and that of course was so significant. Because Dunkirk was held, 338,000 men were evacuated.

"That ill-planned little attack by British tanks really did save Europe. I bet none of the blokes knew the significance of their action back then. The Allies would have lost those ports overnight if the Panzers had carried on and think what Churchill would have had to do? Many speculate that he would have had to sue for some kind of peace."

In their official history of the campaign written in the 1980s, the Germans emphasised Hitler's decision to halt the Panzers. The reinforced ports, particularly Dunkirk, allowed the British to fight another day and ultimately led to success in WWII as opposed to being defeated in 1940."

Source: Wiki / PD Holman



The Matilda II was first used by the 7th Royal Tank Regiment in France but became particularly associated for its service in the North Africa Campaign

With Manstein's plan succeeding in trapping the Allies, the BEF took matters into its own hands. During 23–24 May, its commander, Lord Gort, decided to abandon the British role in an Anglo-French counterattack. The priority became evacuating the BEF and as many French and Belgian units as possible by sea. The resulting Operation Dynamo lifted 338,000 troops, primarily from Dunkirk. This saved the BEF but was largely regarded as a betrayal by the French. With the fall of the Channel ports, the Germans struck south from the River Somme, and despite brave resistance from the French and the remaining British forces, capitulation became inevitable. Paris was captured on 14 June, which was little more than a month after the German invasion began. Like the race to the coast, the Panzers sped across France to mop up pockets of resistance, and France surrendered on 22 June.

"The seeds of failure"

The sudden fall of France ripped up the balance of power in Europe, with the country being divided between the Nazis and the puppet Vichy government for the next four years. In a few weeks, the Germans had used armour and mobility to neutralise a great power and severely weakened Britain's military capability.

Panzers had played an important part, although Willey is keen to stress that the role of propaganda

was just as important. "This warfare wasn't unique to the Germans, but they achieved an amazing strategic outcome in France that showed the potential of armoured forces.

"However, we have almost accepted Joseph Goebbels' propaganda that the Germans were planning this for ages and that blitzkrieg was not a gamble but a mighty force unleashed.

"Goebbels promoted that idea with lots of footage of tanks racing past with Stuka dive-bombers overhead. In the newsreels, it's very hard to see the horse-drawn units that came later. It was all shot from the front end and so, in a sense, we are repeating his propaganda if we still emphasise the 'might' of the German army. It wasn't the case, because it was how the Germans used their forces that led to the victory. It's very hard to change that old perspective."

Perhaps the most complex legacy was the contribution of Hitler to the German success. "Hitler and the High Command all had worries about letting the tanks go. They were nervous of their own success and amazed at the victory. However, there are no two ways about it – if Hitler said something, then it happened.

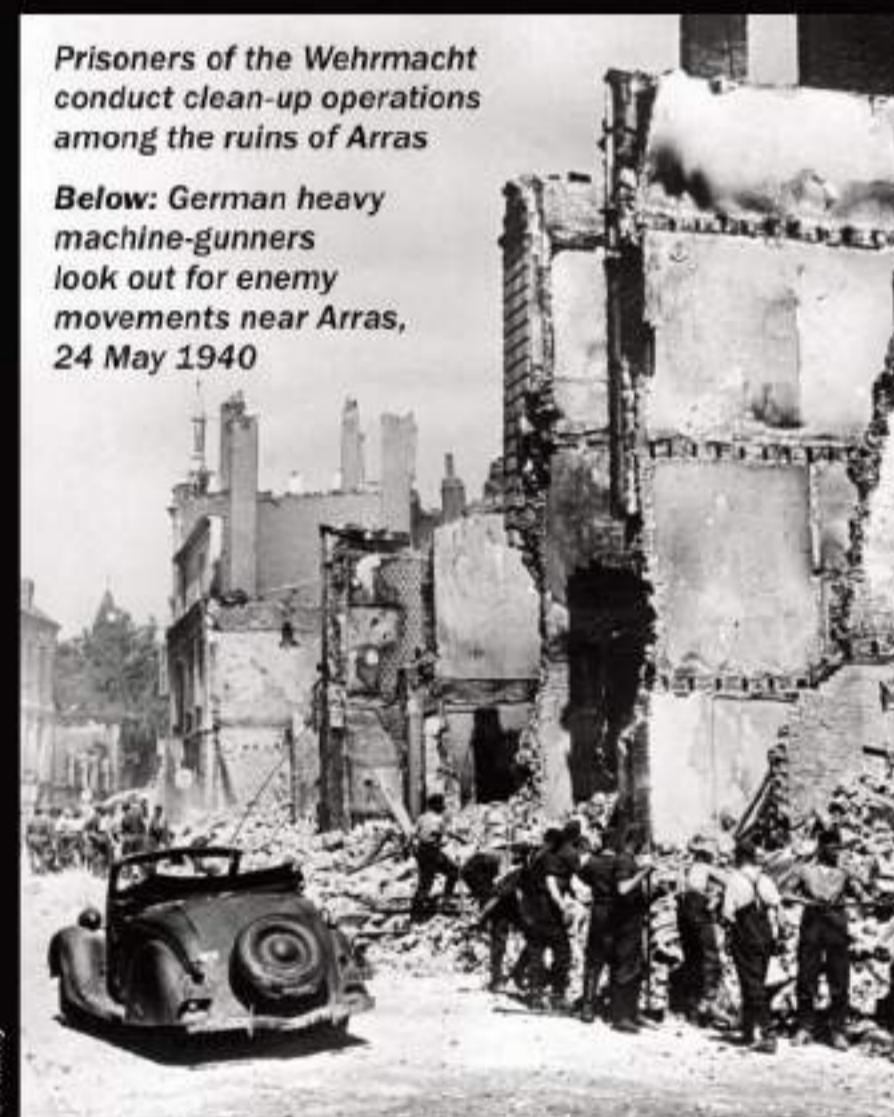
"At the outbreak of the war the German High Command thought, 'He's dropped us in it'. However, when they won in France it was very hard to argue with Hitler because he backed the Manstein Plan against their advice. It had worked

and the victory was his. It was Hitler who then demanded an 88mm gun on a tank, which led to the Tiger programme. The German military were not interested in super-heavy tanks at all – it was because Hitler ordered it. He became influential on German tank design to a degree that Churchill would never have done."

Nevertheless, Willey believes that the Panzers' achievements were also the root cause of Hitler's defeat. "The irony is that his nervousness about victory led to, what seemed at the time, minor failings. He stopped the tanks for 24 hours after Arras, which gave the British an advantage. You can step back and say that he let the British get away. This saved the BEF, strengthened Churchill's resolve and ultimately ruined Hitler's plans."

This mistake seemed minimal in 1940 but conversely, the armoured success made Hitler overconfident. "He developed an omnipotent belief in his own decisions that led to the invasion of Russia and declaring war on America. This was Hitler's megalomania, but the German military were not in a position to argue. Because they had been so successful in France they went onto the next phase by turning east with the same Panzer advances and encirclements.

"However, that lightning warfare couldn't work with Russia's geographical size. Therefore, at the height of his success in France, Hitler had introduced the little seeds of his failure."



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© Getty



Destroyed British tanks pictured in France

The Maginot Line

The French built a huge system of technically impregnable fortifications along the majority of its borders that German forces famously avoided

One of the most formidable military projects in history, the Maginot Line was designed to prevent a repeat of the carnage of WWI, let alone a German conquest of France. A series of concrete fortifications, obstacles and weapon installations, the Line was constructed between 1929-38 and named after André Maginot, the French Minister of War (1929-31).

Built on the French side of its borders with Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Italy, the Line was impervious to most forms of attack, including tank fire and aerial bombings. Its statistics were remarkable, with a length of 280 miles and a cost to the French Government of 3.3 billion Francs. It consisted of 142 bunkers, 352 casemates and 5,000 blockhouses. Around 1.5 million cubic metres of concrete and 150,000 tons of steel were used, and at its broadest the line was over 16 miles deep. It also contained booby traps such as

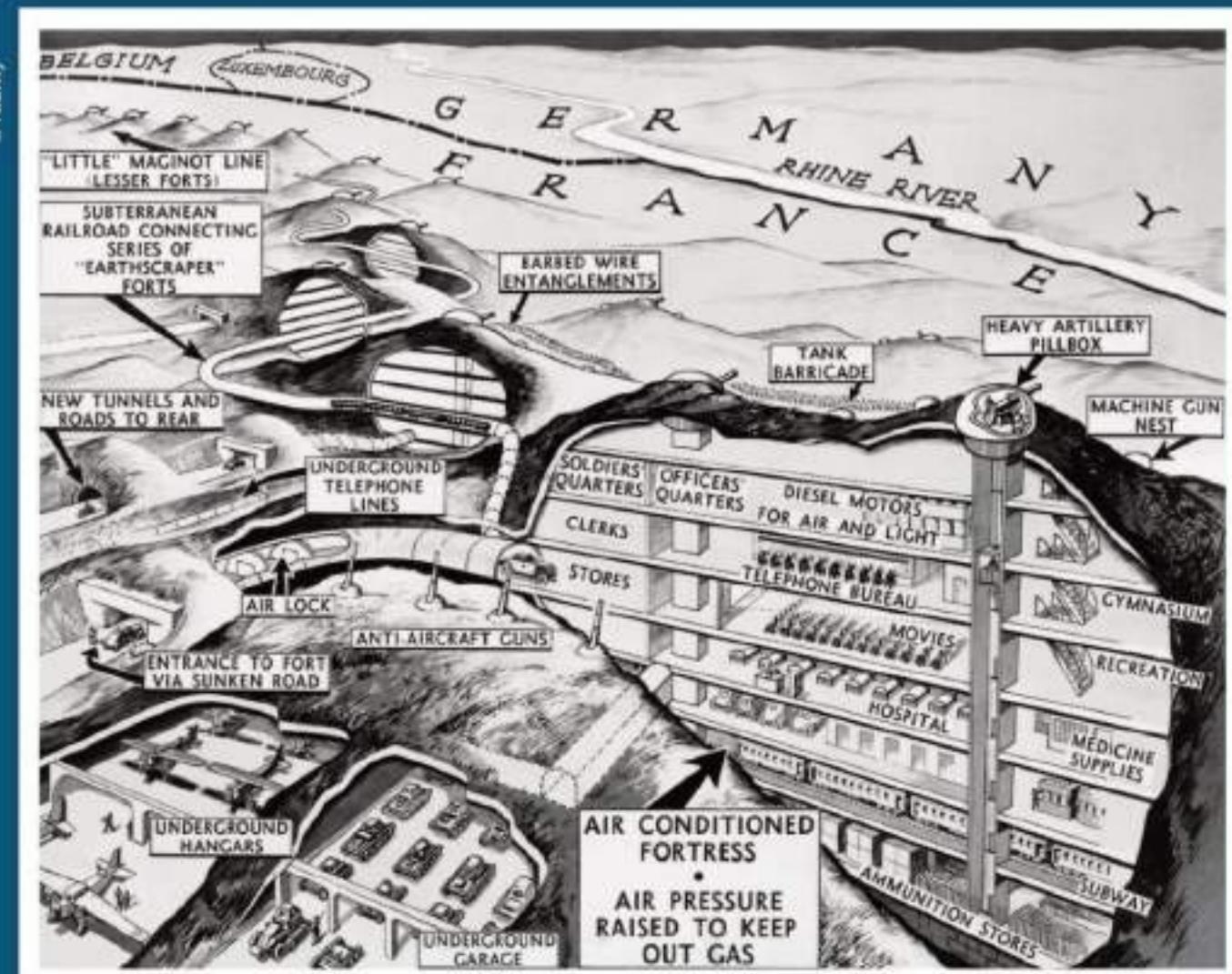
minefields, hidden gun nests, dams and levees to open in an emergency and thin rear defences so that it could be easily retaken by French forces.

The Maginot Line became the pride of France, but it did not extend along the Belgian border (particularly near the Ardennes forest) to the English Channel. This proved to be an infamous flaw when the Germans simply outflanked it in May 1940. However, in armoured terms, there was a logical reason for this, as David Willey explains.

"A Panzer attack would have failed because they were not of an armoured quality that could withstand all those emplaced guns.

"Also, when you attack you want a numerical advantage, but that wouldn't have happened if they had gone against the Maginot Line in the same way. They would have been playing into the French hands for a long-term war and that was not in their interests."

"THE LINE WAS IMPERVIOUS TO MOST FORMS OF ATTACK, INCLUDING TANK FIRE AND AERIAL BOMBINGS"



A cartoon from 1940 of the elaborate subterranean installations within the Maginot Line. This included hospitals, telephone exchanges, elevators and underground railways





American soldiers examine Block 13, Hochwald West Fortress on the Maginot Line in 1944. The Germans had actually used the Maginot Line's defences to bombard the US 3rd Army



PANZER II

THE FORGOTTEN STAR OF GERMANY'S VICTORIES

Tank expert and veteran Richard Cutland discusses how this 'unsung light tank' was the most numerous and successful armoured German vehicle in May 1940

Panzers were the beating heart of Germany's battle tanks during WWII. The most famous variants were the medium Panzer III and IV tanks that have dominated perceptions of German armoured warfare. However, the most numerous German tank in May 1940 was their lighter predecessor – the Panzer II. Although it was less powerful and memorable than its successors it was still a highly successful tank.



Above: A Panzer II Ausf C at the Musée des Blindés, Saumur, France

Richard Cutland is the head of Military Relations Europe for Wargaming and served in the British Royal Tank Regiment for 30 years. He discusses the origins of the Panzer II, its importance during the invasion of France and why it has been neglected by tank historians.

How was the Panzer II developed?

The Panzer I was the starting block for the Panzer II. It was initially designed as a fighting tank but, more critically, as a vehicle that could give the Germans experience of armoured vehicles. At this

stage, they were already on the Panzer III and IV. The Panzer II was developed as an interim vehicle. This had to act as an infantry-support vehicle, be proofed against small-arms fire, be able to cross battlefields and conduct independent operations. The Panzer I met these criteria, but the Panzer II was the natural progression.

To what extent was the Panzer II an improvement on the Panzer I?

Unlike the Panzer I, the Panzer II was always intended to be used in combat but not to the

A Panzer II Ausf F. This variant was constructed between 1941–42 and was the final major version of the tank



Richard Cutland's operational experience in tanks includes the Gulf and Iraq wars as well as teaching armoured tactics in the British Army



extent that it actually was. The Panzer I was really intended as a training vehicle and had very poor armour. The Panzer II was much larger and more heavily armoured but was still categorised as a light tank. However, it became the mainstay of the Panzer divisions for the first few years of the war.

What were the Panzer II's specifications?

It carried a 20mm KwK L/55 gun, which was basically a converted Flak 30 anti-aircraft gun, and one machine gun. It weighed about ten tons, with a top speed of around 25mph. It also had a three-man crew of a driver, commander-gunner and loader-radio operator.

What were its strengths and weaknesses?

For its strengths, the Panzer II had a low profile, which made it a small target. It was incredibly manoeuvrable and had a potent gun against lightly armoured vehicles and infantry. However, by early 1942 it was outgunned by the majority of the British and Soviet tanks. The Panzer II Ausf F had to be introduced, which was equipped with a larger gun and thicker armour. Its performance in North Africa and Russia was not particularly good, largely because its engine couldn't cope with the increased weight.

"THE PANZER II COULD RUSH ALLIED TANKS LIKE A SWARM OF WASPS. ONE TANK MAY NOT BE PARTICULARLY STRONG, BUT IF YOU HAD 12-20 COMING TOGETHER THE PANZER II COULD WORK FORMIDABLY, WITH ITS STRENGTH LYING IN NUMBERS"

What was the Panzer II's operational history before May 1940?

During 1936–39, production gradually increased and they were used for training. Its first real war operation came with the annexation of Czechoslovakia, but that happened almost without a fight. Its most serious operation before France was the invasion of Poland.

The Panzer II was the most numerous model in the Wehrmacht. There are differing numbers as to how many were used, but possibly 1,223 were used in Poland. The records show that it was efficient against lightly protected Polish tanks.

However, many were destroyed by Polish anti-tank rifles, and a lot were also destroyed at the Battle of Warsaw [8–28 September 1939]. The German military became concerned and recommended that the Panzer II be withdrawn as a front-line tank.

How did it become the most numerous tank in the German forces in May 1940?

It was purely because nothing else was ready at that stage. Germany was at a blitzkrieg peak against France and the Panzer II was quickly put into service. It was a good, efficient vehicle but the problem was that it wasn't up to the tank standards of the Allies. However, the Germans used the Panzer II well because they were highly trained.

Were there any notable engagements with the French during the invasion?

It's very hard to find operational records where they purely refer to the Panzer II. This is partially because at stages there was a mix of the Panzer II, III and IV. In the heat of a campaign, I don't think anybody was too concerned between the Panzer models. Most reports just refer to 'the Panzer', of which there were many variants. The Panzer II



Above: Adolf Hitler inspects a destroyed French tank after the campaign



Above, right: The Char B1 was a powerful opponent of the Panzer II. Some captured models were used by the Germans on the Eastern Front, while others were recaptured and used by Free French and resistance forces from 1944

A Panzer II crosses a steep slope under fire during the campaign





GERMANY ASCENDANT

*A Panzer fires at
a French anti-tank
position, May 1940*





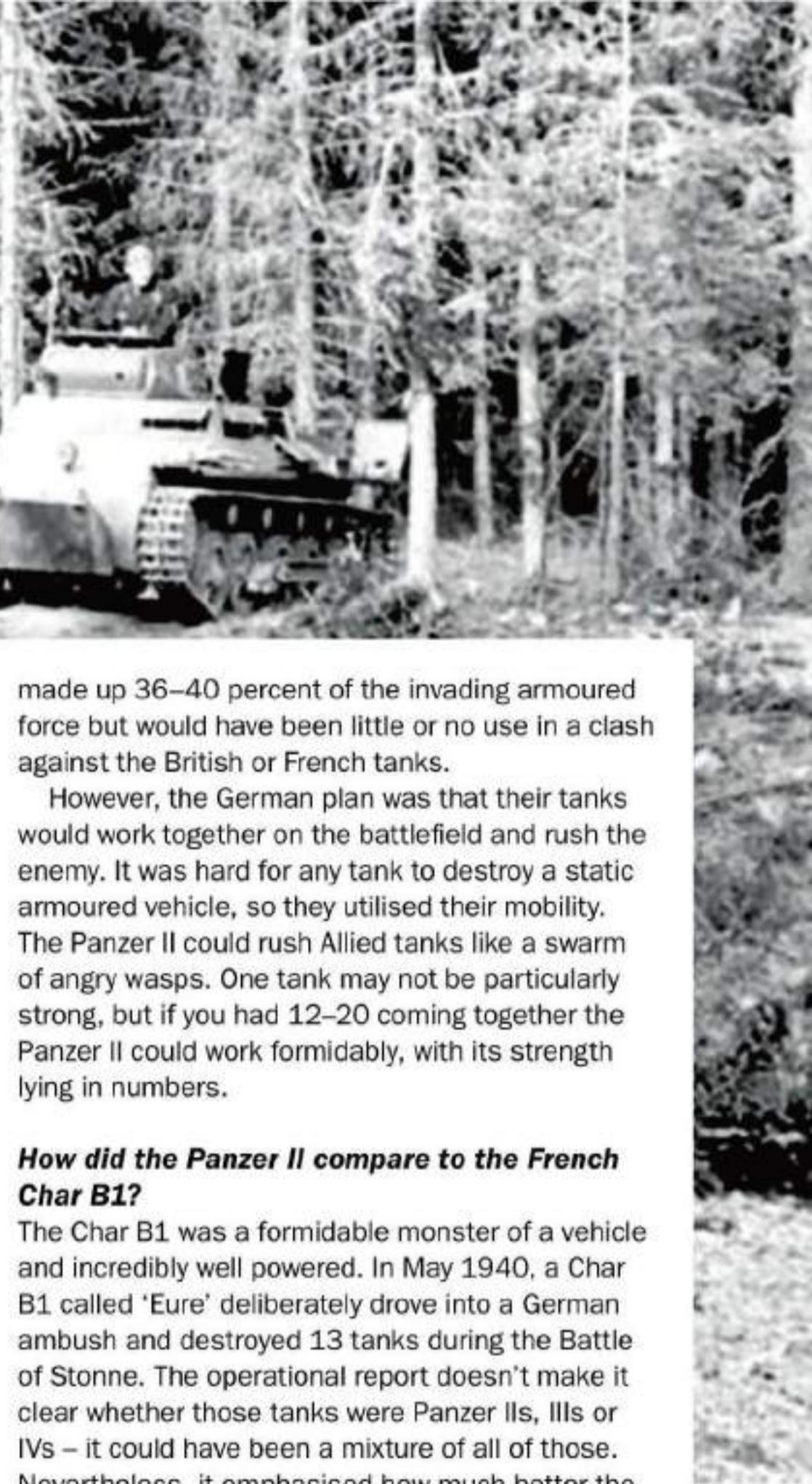
A Panzer II (foreground) and Panzer I drive through woods, May 1940

"WHAT IS CLEAR ABOUT THE PANZER II IS THAT THE GERMANS WON MOST OF THEIR SIGNIFICANT VICTORIES WITH THIS GENERALLY UNSUNG LIGHT TANK"



A Panzer II Ausf C of 6th Panzer Division on display at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

Source: Wiki / Creative Commons PD



made up 36–40 percent of the invading armoured force but would have been little or no use in a clash against the British or French tanks.

However, the German plan was that their tanks would work together on the battlefield and rush the enemy. It was hard for any tank to destroy a static armoured vehicle, so they utilised their mobility. The Panzer II could rush Allied tanks like a swarm of angry wasps. One tank may not be particularly strong, but if you had 12–20 coming together the Panzer II could work formidably, with its strength lying in numbers.

How did the Panzer II compare to the French Char B1?

The Char B1 was a formidable monster of a vehicle and incredibly well powered. In May 1940, a Char B1 called 'Eure' deliberately drove into a German ambush and destroyed 13 tanks during the Battle of Stonne. The operational report doesn't make it clear whether those tanks were Panzer IIs, IIIs or IVs – it could have been a mixture of all of those. Nevertheless, it emphasised how much better the Allied tanks were in terms of armament and firepower than the Panzer IIs.

There was also a drawback. The Char B1 was an amazing tank but it was expensive to build and very heavy on fuel. The logistical chain for it was so difficult that it wasn't put into battle very often because there wasn't enough fuel, so the French had to be very careful.

To what extent did the Panzer II contribute to the German victory in France?

It's a combination of the slow development of the Panzer III and IV and the unexpectedly rapid expansion of Panzer forces from 1936. This meant that the Panzer II was the most important tank at the beginning of WWII. It was still the most numerous at the start of the Western offensive in May 1940. It contributed significantly to the German victory because it was the most deployed vehicle. Regardless of how useful it was it still did its job and did it very well.

How much has the Panzer II's reputation been neglected compared to its more famous successors?

Its reputation has been completely neglected. Conversely, most of the Germans' defeats came while using the more famous, heavier tanks, which are the ones people hear about.

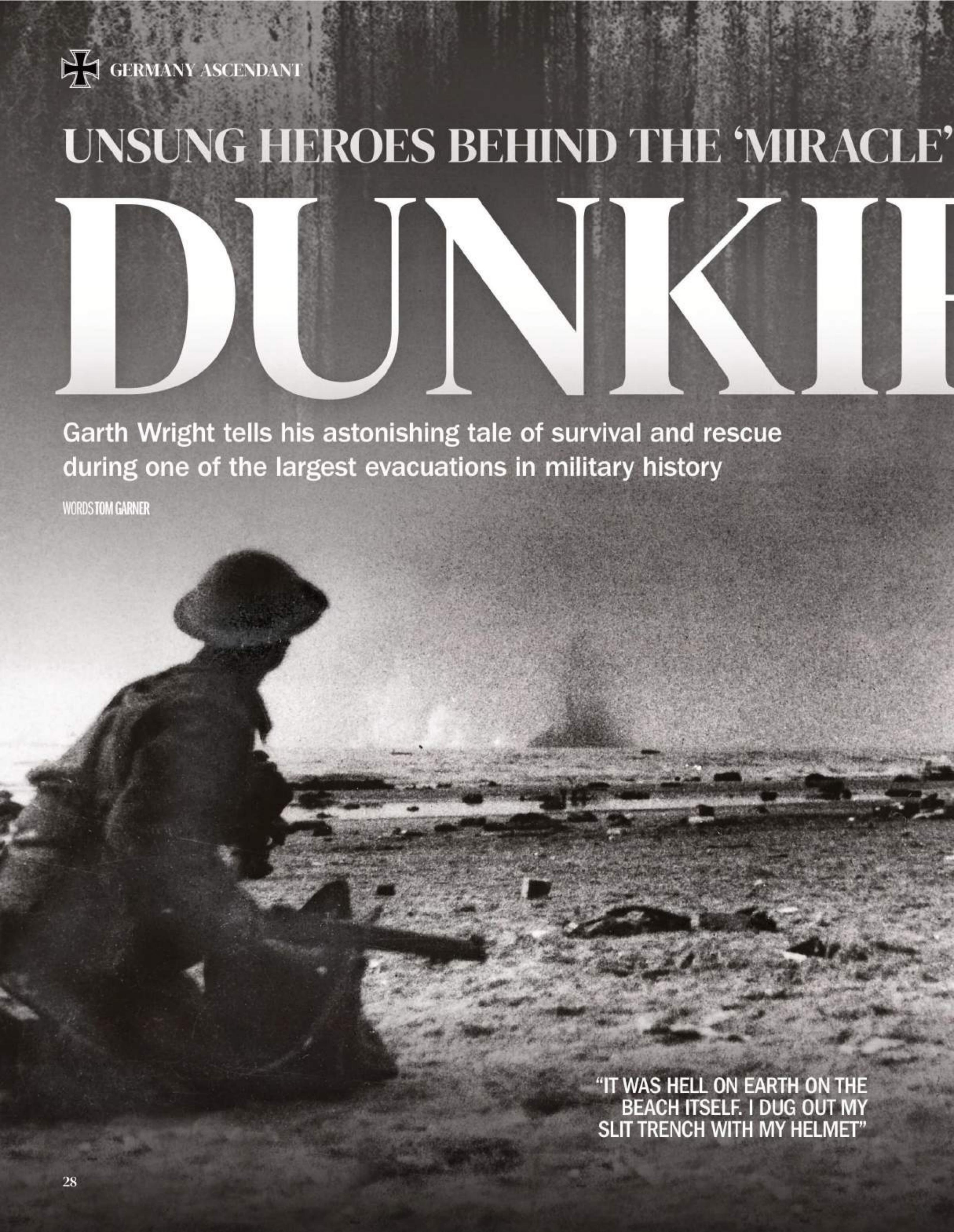
The simple answer is that it was not a particularly exciting vehicle when you compare it to the likes of the Tiger tanks etc. However, it was a critical starting block for everything. It passed through the annals of tank history and development pretty much unknown but it was a great vehicle for what it was used for.

UNSUNG HEROES BEHIND THE 'MIRACLE'

DUNKIRK

Garth Wright tells his astonishing tale of survival and rescue during one of the largest evacuations in military history

WORDSTOM GARNER



"IT WAS HELL ON EARTH ON THE BEACH ITSELF. I DUG OUT MY SLIT TRENCH WITH MY HELMET"



"Hell on Earth". British infantry shoot at German aircraft during the evacuation, June 1940. Luftwaffe attacks were relentless at Dunkirk

Summer, 1940, and on a beach in northern France hundreds of thousands of Allied troops are stranded – literally squeezed into the sea by the German blitzkrieg. Among the sand dunes is a 20-year-old despatch rider of the British Expeditionary Force who attempts to shelter from the relentless bombardment of Luftwaffe air attacks. His only defence is a mere slit trench that he has dug out with his own tin helmet. Sand is blown high in the sky all around him and the noise is deafening. The young soldier has already experienced a litany of grim incidents on the road to the beach, but he now wearily becomes resigned to the fact that he may not survive another 24 hours. Only a miracle can save him now.

The scene of this carnage was a place that changed the course of history: Dunkirk. Between 27 May and 4 June 1940, over 338,000 British, French, Canadian and Belgian troops were successfully evacuated against huge odds in over 900 vessels, the majority of them privately owned.

After the horror of the Battle of France the evacuation became instantly iconic and epitomised Britain's resolve to continue fighting Nazi Germany no matter what the cost. One of the evacuated soldiers was the beleaguered despatch rider: gunner Garth Wright. Now aged 97, Wright is a living symbol of the "Dunkirk spirit", and 77 years after his brutal experiences in France he tells us the moving story of both his and his army's remarkable survival against the odds.

'Basic' training

Born on 13 August, 1919, Wright, a native of Devon, joined the British Army with some of his friends before war broke out. "I joined around June-July 1939. When I joined up there were five of us originally. There was myself, Ken Stephens, Roger "Reg" Palmer, Harry Anderson and Peter Dodd – we were brothers-in-arms. We went across as one when war broke out."

"AT NIGHT THERE WAS A RED GLOW IN THE SKY. BY DAY THE OIL TANKS WERE ONE OF THE GERMANS' FIRST TARGETS & THERE WAS A BLACK POOL OF SMOKE A MILE HIGH DRIFTING ALONG"

Below: Garth Wright (front row, far right on floor) with other members of 153 Battery, 51st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, at Vitry-en-Artois, France, November 1939. Among the troops are his friends Harry Anderson, Peter Dodd and Owen Kelloway: only Wright and Kelloway survived the war



Wright and his friends joined 153 Battery, 51st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery, and he initially trained as a motorcycle despatch rider. However, his training in Devon was rudimentary. "There were Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft guns pulled by a tractor, which I drove. I was a despatch driver to start with and I finished up as a tractor driver! Our basic training consisted of going up to Plasterdown on a Sunday and we'd have perhaps one gun up there. Somebody would run around among the gorse bushes and suddenly pop up with his hat in the air and the sergeant would give the target bearings. That was virtually the only training we had before we went into serious action in 1940. It was very, very basic indeed."

Wright heard Neville Chamberlain's announcement that war had been declared on the radio during a church service at Tavistock Guildhall. Despite the enthusiasm of others Wright remembers feeling uneasy. "Some of the boys cheered, and at the time I wondered what they were cheering at because I knew then that it wasn't going to be a short affair. We were in for a pretty long haul, which indeed it was."

Events moved quickly for 153 Battery. "It was a Sunday morning when war was declared. We were then on our bikes. We set off for Avonmouth on the Monday morning and we left a lot of the young lads and the older boys behind. We just had a skeleton battery made up of people of the sort of age that would be expected to go to the front."



Nevertheless, seasoned soldiers soon joined Wright. "We went up to Thursley camp to pick up some more vehicles, a couple more guns and also some reservists that had already done their 21 years in India. About a third of our battery was made up of these old sweats."

The shadow of WWI

The battery was soon shipped out from Avonmouth, and Wright landed with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at Saint-Nazaire on the French Atlantic coast, where he received a cultural shock. "We were greeted by a meal from the French boys – they were dishing out bowls of soup. I questioned the soup and said, 'Is this horse?' They almost gave me a wallop with the ladle so I thought I better keep my mouth shut and eat up!"

Wright was transported through France and eventually arrived close to the Belgian border, where he was primarily located at Seclin aerodrome near Lille. His main task was the defence of the airport, but one of his assignments was eerily grim.

"Wherever we went we dug in and used our guns: that was the basic job to do. I was digging out a gun pit at Merville, and every shovel full of earth that came up had a memento of a terrible battle from WWI: cap badges, buttons and little bits of bone. What a terrible war that must have been. Farmers were going around taking out shells and unexploded stuff, just parking it beside the field. I could see massive things such as artillery pieces. It was everywhere."

Wright was posted in the Seclin area for months between late 1939 and early 1940, but his "phoney

war" would change irrevocably with the sudden German invasion of France in May.

Blitzkrieg

On 10 May 1940, German forces swept through the Netherlands and Belgium, with the Dutch surrendering four days later. The Allies attempted to push into Belgium but were forced back and the Germans entered France on 13 May through the Ardennes forest near Sedan. Despite stiff resistance, Panzer tanks broke out and raced towards the English Channel with extensive Luftwaffe air support. The vanguard reached the Channel on 20 May and the Allies were now cut in two and facing annihilation.

The BEF was still largely based on the French-Belgian border, but despite their fierce opposition to the relentless onslaught, they were forced back to an area of the French coast that focused around the port of Dunkirk. The Allies were experiencing 'blitzkrieg', and for men like Wright who were on the receiving end, the German attack was a shock.

"The Germans set off with their blitzkrieg lightning strike, and it was indeed! It came through us like a dose of salts – coming down and circling

us in no time, and the roads were choked up with refugees and civilians."

Wright recalls how unprepared the Allies were. "It was really frightening. It was men against boys really – they'd had armoured experience on other fields of war in Poland and Czechoslovakia. We weren't prepared for that sort of warfare, and the French in particular were still horse-drawn. We were not much in advance of them at all. It was a blitzkrieg all right."

Now in full retreat towards Dunkirk, both soldiers and civilian refugees fled from the Germans, and the result was chaos. "The refugees choked the roads, and to make matters worse, the Germans came down with their Me109s strafing them. The refugees, poor devils, were killed or choking the roads. You couldn't move. If we did try any manoeuvre or try to put up a fight we couldn't have done it, and the Germans had no interest in life; they just rolled right through them."

Wright's main problems from the air were Junkers Ju 87 'Stuka' dive-bombers. "A lot of people pooh-poohed the Stuka but by God it was an effective plane. It was sure to hit the target; you just aimed the plane. The only target the

"THE REFUGEES CHOKED THE ROADS, AND TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, THE GERMANS CAME DOWN WITH THEIR ME109S STRAFING THEM. THE REFUGEES, POOR DEVILS, WERE KILLED OR CHOKING THE ROADS. YOU COULDN'T MOVE"



Above: War refugees on a French road. The roads to Dunkirk were clogged with soldiers and fleeing civilians



Above: Garth Wright was trained on the Swedish-built Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft multipurpose auto-cannon



Above: Burning oil tanks at Dunkirk, late May 1940



Gunner Wright's perilous motorcycle route

A vital connection between HQ and the troops, Wright risked a sniper's bullet to help the evacuation

As a gunner in the Royal Artillery, Garth Wright assisted with the hasty defence of the BEF in the area around Dunkirk. His specific task was to act as a despatch rider between the British headquarters in Dunkirk and the outlying guns at Bray-Dunes, another important place of embarkation. His route ran along a canal, which was most likely the Canal de Furnes,

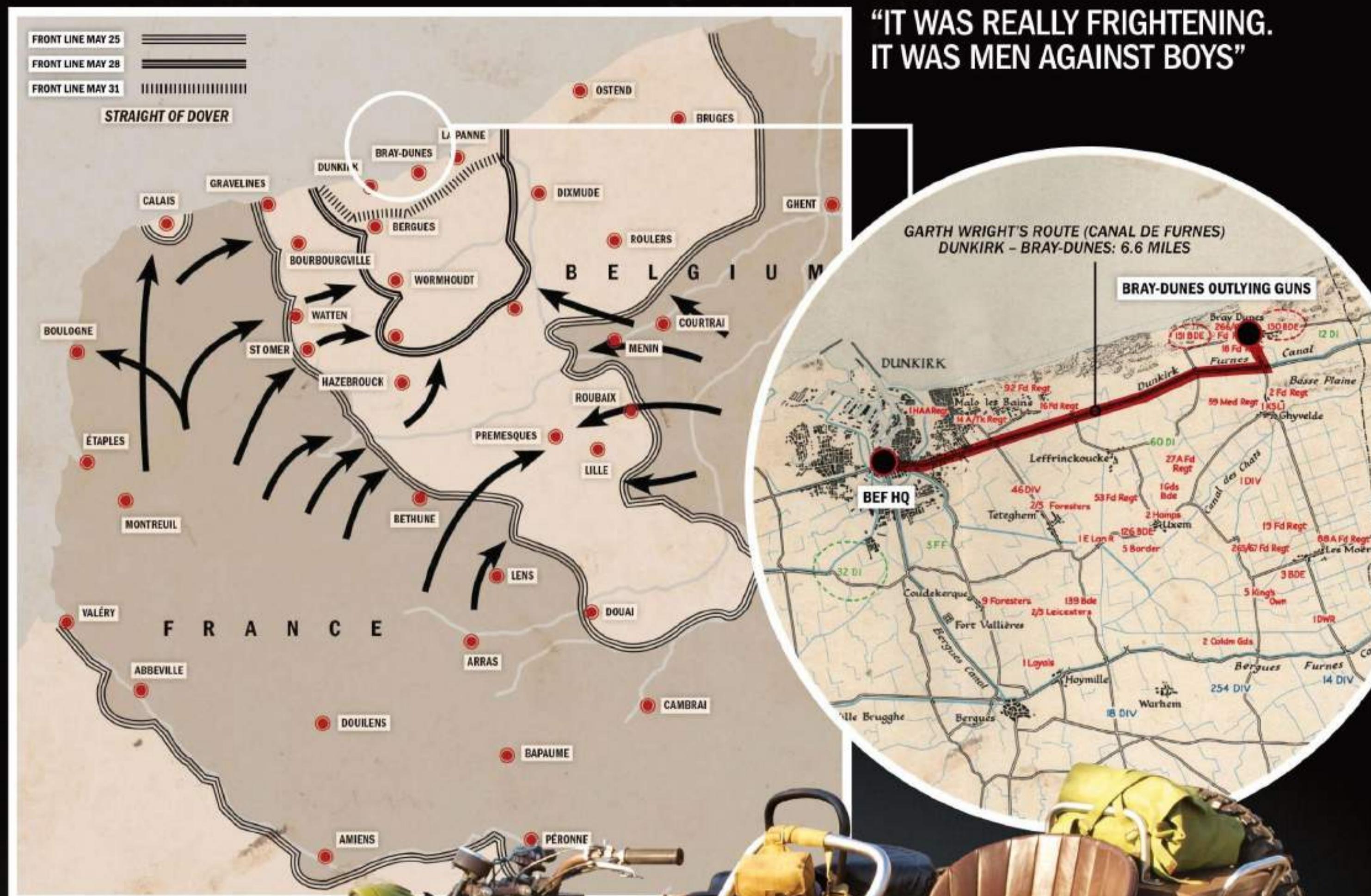
and he would have had to travel around 6.6 miles each way.

Wright would have performed this dangerous task on motorcycles such as the Norton WD (War Department) 'Big 4' and Norton WD 16H. Initially designed between 1907 and 1911 respectively, the Big 4 and 16H were first supplied to the British

Armed Forces during the 1930s and were used for despatch riding, training, reconnaissance, convoys and performing escort duties.

Although they could reach a top speed of 68mph, Wright recalls that he could not reach 50mph while riding at Dunkirk. Over a 48-hour period a German sniper twice shot at Wright.

"IT WAS REALLY FRIGHTENING. IT WAS MEN AGAINST BOYS"



Right: Norton Motorcycle Company produced over 100,000 motorcycles for the British war effort during WWII, including 4,700 of the Big 4 model that hauled sidecars





A French soldier observes the destruction left behind after a German aerial bombing raid, 1 June 1940



gunner on the ground had was a little thin line coming down. You could see the bomb leave the plane and you knew damn well that it was going to land directly on your gun. What do you do? Scarper, or do you stick it out? Well of course it was pretty frightening."

A chaotic retreat

During the offensive Wright found himself alone at one point while driving a truck and had a close encounter with enemy troops. "I went down to the HQ at Amiens and on the way back I got cut off by Jerry. I was on my own. I stopped at a café, got a bottle of booze, sat on the step of the café and

as soon as I sat down dogs and kids came around. A French boy came up and I gave him a bar of chocolate and we sat together. All of a sudden up ahead a half-track went by with SS onboard – they didn't take prisoners, so I thought it was probably time to move! I made my way back to the smoke at Dunkirk."

Allied relations sometimes broke down on the retreat, as Wright discovered. "On the way I was challenged by some French or Belgians. They wanted to ride on my truck and I said no. I had a girl on board, she had asked me to take her to a maternity hospital nearby as she was heavily pregnant, so I said I would take her there and drop her off. She was sat beside me and they raised their guns. I took out my Tommy gun and said, 'Right, who's first?' and they backed off. I went on, dropped the girl off and picked the convoy up."

Following this incident, Wright drove on with a truck laden with RAF supplies, including whisky and cigarettes that he had gathered from an abandoned airfield. The truck became damaged and broke down, and Wright was forced to make a decision. "I picked the convoy up but the bloomin' truck got bogged down. The soldiers nearby said, 'Get over this side.' There was a bloke in front of me who had a fag on and all of the petrol from the truck was

running into the drain. All of my salvaged supplies were on board this truck and I thought, 'Why the devil should anybody else have it?' I let the bloke go on smoking and when he dropped the fag end the whole damn lot went up. All of the supplies, including booze, went up in smoke!"

By now the fires of Dunkirk were visible. "At night there was a red glow in the sky. By day the oil tanks were one of the Germans' first targets and there was a black pool of smoke a mile high drifting along. Jerry used to come through that smoke and drive down onto us."

The BEF was now completely surrounded by the Germans around the Dunkirk pocket, and Wright's battery was approaching the town when tragedy struck him personally.

"The column was being led in by my friend Ken Stephens, who was a despatch rider. The Stukas bombed the head of the column and poor old Ken was blown off his bike and killed by the side of the road. A 1,500-weight truck followed him. Those onboard were all killed and the boy on the tailboards was severely injured."



Men of the Royal Ulster Rifles attempting to launch boats that will take them to waiting destroyers, 1 June 1940



Garth Wright was evacuated on HMS Codrington, a ship that also rescued 4,538 other troops

"WE WEREN'T PREPARED FOR THAT SORT OF WARFARE"

The port of Dunkirk shrouded in smoke after German bombing had started fires. Wright remembers seeing a red glow from a distance because of the flames

Right: Garth Wright pictured behind the lines in Tunisia c.1943-44. After Dunkirk, Wright took part in Operation Torch and fought at the Battle of Monte Cassino



Cut off from rescue

A huge part of the BEF remained in France to support the French Army after Operation Dynamo. It soon suffered the consequences

Long rows of British and French prisoners-of-war assemble at Dunkirk around 4 June 1940. For them, Operation Dynamo came too late



Although the evacuation from Dunkirk was indeed a remarkable achievement, it has often been forgotten that tens of thousands of soldiers were left behind as the rescue ships made for Britain. As well as those killed, around 41,000 were reported missing or captured, with a significant proportion of those being two brigades of the 51st Highland Division.

Commanded by Major General Victor Fortune, the division had been in France since January 1940 and was stationed at the Ouvrage Hackenberg fortress in Lorraine on the Maginot Line. Consequently, the Highlanders escaped the subsequent encirclement of the BEF, but it also hindered their escape from France.

The division was attached to the French Tenth Army and pulled back to a new line along the River Somme, where it was heavily attacked in the days after Operation Dynamo was completed on 4 June. Between 5–6 June the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders suffered some of the worst casualties in the regiment's history. However, they, and the majority of 154th Brigade, were able to escape from Le Havre during Operation Cycle. Other brigades of the division were not so lucky.

Over 10,000 men of 152nd and 153rd Brigades became trapped with French troops at Saint-Valéry-en-Caux on the Normandy coast and were forced to surrender on 12 June. General Fortune became one of the most senior British officers to be captured during WWII and the defeat of the 51st Division was considered to be the end of Allied resistance during the brutal Battle of France.

Nevertheless, in a display of how tenacious the Highlanders could be, out of the 290 British POWs who successfully escaped home to Britain by June 1941, 134 were members of the 51st Highlands Division.

A soldier from the Cameron Highlanders looks through a periscope in the Fort de Sainghin on the Maginot Line, 3 November, 1939



**"THE DEFEAT OF THE 51ST DIVISION WAS
CONSIDERED TO BE THE END OF ALLIED
RESISTANCE DURING THE BATTLE OF FRANCE"**





POWs are marched away from the beaches of Dunkirk to a German internment camp. These were the men who covered the Allied evacuation

The men left behind

Military historian and author Sean Longden discusses the heroic rearguard actions that covered Operation Dynamo and the terrible conditions that Allied soldiers endured in captivity



How important were the rearguard actions for the success of Operation Dynamo?

They were absolutely vital: without the rearguard the evacuation just could not have happened. All the way through the retreat from Belgium and northern France there were well-organised defensive lines such as rivers and canals.

Individual units continually retreated and defended and that was essential in stalling the German advance and buying time.

Holding at places like Mont des Cats and Cassel were important, particularly because of the importance of high ground in what is an incredibly flat landscape. It's perfect defensive countryside and criss-crossed with canals and drainage ditches. The proof of that is when you look at what happened to the German garrison at Dunkirk in 1944-45: they were just bypassed. The British made the decision to just besiege Dunkirk and not to try and attack the town. That tells you a lot about why the Germans didn't choose to finish off the British in 1940.

How did the 51st Highland Division become detached from the BEF before it was subsequently stranded in France after the evacuation?

It's often talked about the willing 'sacrifice' of the division, but quite simply the reason they get stuck in France is that they're not part of the main retreat and evacuation. At the time of the German attack they were serving further south alongside the French in the Maginot Line. When the attack comes in they were geographically not there. Their withdrawal is on a line heading west: they're not withdrawing to the northwest like everyone else, so when the Germans cut the British off they are south of that line.

I interviewed veterans from the 51st and they weren't aware of what was going on elsewhere; all they knew about was what was going on in their zone. They knew things were bad and that there was a retreat but they didn't have form or understanding outside of their own area. By the time the 51st

engaged again the evacuation was pretty much over, but they fought on and sacrificed in the same way as everyone else did.

Did some Allied soldiers manage to evade capture after Dunkirk?

Whole units were cut off and a lot of people headed along the coast to find fishing vessels to see if they could sail home. That became increasingly difficult once the Germans were fully in occupation but some people did manage it.

There were large numbers of men who walked across country and kept hiding. Others went and lived in villages and waited before getting false documents. If they could get into Vichy France things became a lot easier. Some went off to the US embassy in Paris and the Americans would often help by supplying papers.

Crossing the Pyrenees into Spain was one route, but it wasn't that simple getting to Gibraltar because vast numbers of men ended up in camps in Spain, where they were very badly treated. There was one British sergeant who managed to get to North Africa and then travelled down West Africa before arriving at a British garrison. He turned up, explained his situation and said, "Here I am, I'm reporting for duty. I was left in France and have walked down half of Africa!"

It's hard to verify but certainly more than hundreds managed to escape. In February 1941, a report reached London from Belgium suggesting that there was possibly up to 1,000 British soldiers hiding in villages around Brussels. In April 1941, 13 Belgians were tried for harbouring British troops. There was another figure of 5,000 believed to be hiding in the Pas-de-Calais. There was a complete mix of stories from that period.

What were conditions like for newly captured POWs?

Of all the people I have interviewed about being captured that year every one had a bad time to varying degrees. I've never met anyone who said, 'It was absolutely fine.' For a start they had to deal with the shock of being captured. A lot of them had nothing; they had lost their kit and might not even have water bottles, mess tins, cutlery or blankets.

There were no efforts made to help these men; they went into captivity with what they had. Many ended up

marching 20-30 miles a day, so those who did have kit soon abandoned it.

Exhaustion was the main thing. If anyone stepped out of line they were beaten by the German guards in large numbers. Men who did try to escape or even just ran off to a pump or horse troughs to get some water were shot. Virtually everybody that I interviewed about going into captivity had memories of people just being shot for disobeying the Germans. It was utterly awful for them. Also, it was an incredibly long period to be in captivity. In that initial period they had no idea whether the British were completely defeated or how long the war would last – they were completely cut off from the world. Although many eventually made the best of their situation the mental scars of their captivity were very significant. I don't think any POW, no matter how long or short their captivity is, escapes without being mentally scarred.

Why do you think the sufferings of the men left behind have been largely forgotten?

In 1940 the story of those left behind just did not fit the brief. Right from the beginning it was necessary to celebrate the evacuation because the future for the British was based on that escape. For the people left behind it was really unfortunate that the necessities of the time meant that all the publicity had to go on turning what was an awful defeat into some measure of victory.

Afterwards there were some fantastic memoirs that came out, but they weren't necessarily the most successful. It was very difficult for people to talk honestly and openly about how awful their experiences had been. For instance, I don't think the publishing world in 1950 wanted to know the depths of what those men went through. If you had presented the truth they just couldn't have handled it.

"WITHOUT THE REARGUARD THE EVACUATION COULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED... ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE RETREAT THERE WERE ORGANISED DEFENSIVE LINES"

It was a terrible start to a situation that had quickly become nightmarish.

"Hell on Earth"

Dunkirk in May 1940 was a scene of chaos. During the spring, BEF numbers in France had grown to a peak of 400,000, and tens of thousands had already been killed during the blitzkrieg offensive. The bulk of the BEF, the remnants of three French armies and a contingent of Belgian forces now converged on the defensive perimeter set up around the port. Dunkirk was the longest uninterrupted beach in that sector of the Channel coast and the largest port with suitable facilities to aid a final evacuation by sea. It was also located in a marshy area that could potentially aid its defence. Courageous defensive actions were fought at Calais and Boulogne among other places in order to buy valuable time for the evacuation preparations.

Astonishingly, Adolf Hitler refused requests for the Luftwaffe to completely destroy the Allies at Dunkirk and halted ground attacks for around 48 hours. This gave the British valuable time to proceed properly with the evacuation, which was code named 'Operation Dynamo'. Between 26 May and 4 June 1940, hundreds of thousands of troops

"THEY TOOK ME DOWN THE LOCAL PUB AND I FELT AWFUL. I FELT LIKE A COWARD BECAUSE OLD BOYS FROM WWI WERE BUYING ME DRINKS AS IF I WAS SOME SORT OF HERO"

waited on the beaches to be evacuated. However, as a member of the Royal Artillery, Wright still had defensive duties to carry out.

"We went into Dunkirk and kept on the move, giving what cover we could for the evacuation. We had to keep on the move all the time, keeping mobile up and down the beaches, getting into action and trying to give Jerry as much as he was giving us. We didn't do a bad job."

As a trained motorcyclist, Wright had to take over his dead friend's duties. "When Ken (Stephens) was killed he was the despatch rider and we had no other riders around, so I took over the job keeping in touch with the outlying guns. I did that

for 48 hours or so between what we had for a headquarters in Dunkirk to the outlying guns around Bray-Dunes."

During these motorcycle missions Wright came under fire from a sniper. "I used to have to go along the canal and you could only get 49 miles per hour out of the old thing. I used to head down and just pray because a sniper had a go at me twice and once hit the frame of the bike. The bullet pinged and glanced off and I could see it on the frame. It was one of my more worrying moments of the war."

After around two days performing despatch-riding duties Wright spent a day on Dunkirk beach sheltering among the sand dunes. Conditions were horrendous. "It was hell on Earth on the beach itself. I dug out my slit trench with my helmet. The Germans timed bombing attacks every half hour. They would come over strafing with Me109s and bomb us with Stukas. You could set your watch on the tick of every half hour through daylight hours. Nothing happened at night, but as soon as dawn broke, until sunset, they were over. It was so damn frightening that I was beginning to wish that the next attack would be my last. I thought, 'I'm not going to get out of this so let's get this over with.' I honestly felt that way – it was terrifying."

Abandoned vehicles on a beach at De Panne, Belgium. The BEF alone was forced to abandon 63,879 vehicles after the German invasion



Below: A flotilla of small boats, each heavily loaded with evacuated troops. Garth Wright recalls feeling apprehensive about escaping Dunkirk aboard the 'little ships'



A British soldier shoots at an attacking German aircraft while lying down on Dunkirk beach as German bombs explode all around



French destroyer FR Bourrasque sinking after hitting a mine on the way back from Dunkirk. Approximately 1,200 men were on board and many died





Although he was theoretically highly exposed on the beach Wright believes it may have helped save his life. "A lot of the bombs went into the soft sand and the blast went upwards, whereas if it landed on something solid the blast spread. Dunkirk beach was, in one way, a blessing to us because most of the blast went upwards."

Evacuation

Dunkirk became famous for the civilian 'little ships' that evacuated the troops. Hundreds of privately owned vessels took part in Operation Dynamo, but Wright remembers feeling cautious about the possibility of boarding them. "There were great queues for the little boats and I thought, 'I'm not going out and waiting for that.' I just stayed in my trench and waited. I picked the right deal I think but quite a lot got away with the little ships."

Eventually, amid the explosions, Wright was given an opportunity to get out. "They shouted for volunteer stretcher-bearers. They say don't volunteer for anything but I'm damn glad I volunteered for this one! I got up – anything rather than just sitting there waiting to be the next one to

be picked off. Me and another guy picked up what was left of this poor (wounded) lad and took him out along the Mole."

'East Mole' was a long stone and concrete jetty running out from Dunkirk's harbour entrance with another wooden platform extending out to sea. It was 0.7 miles long and the point of evacuation for more than two-thirds (approximately 200,000) of those rescued in 1940. By the time Wright approached the jetty it had already been under heavy attack.

"(The Mole) had been badly bombed but repaired as much as they could so you could still get access to the destroyer laying off there: HMS Codrington. We took this boy aboard the Codrington and put him down but I don't think he lived long. I went to go back to the slit trench but the captain told me to stay on board. I didn't argue too much with him and I had a first-class trip from Dunkirk to Dover. I consider myself damn lucky that I got away."

HMS Codrington was an A-Class destroyer and had already seen service during the Norwegian Campaign only weeks earlier. She was transferred to Dover Command for Operation Dynamo on 27

May, and between 28 May and 2 June the ship evacuated 4,538 troops over seven trips from Dunkirk, including Wright. Unlike most of the other destroyers involved in the evacuation, HMS Codrington was spared major damage despite sustained air attacks and was able to continue support duties after Dynamo was completed on 4 June.

A costly 'miracle'

The evacuation of Dunkirk was a remarkable piece of military improvisation. It had initially been estimated that only 45,000 troops could be rescued in two days but in the event over 338,000 soldiers were successfully evacuated in an operation lasting nine days. Of these men 221,504 belonged to the BEF and a further 122,000 were mostly French or Belgian. The sheer number of troops that escaped meant that Britain could fight on and the boost to national morale was considerable. However, it should never be forgotten that Operation Dynamo was the result of a colossal Allied defeat. The human cost alone during the Battle of France was huge. British

"IT SHOULD NEVER BE FORGOTTEN THAT OPERATION DYNAMO WAS THE RESULT OF A COLOSSAL ALLIED DEFEAT. THE HUMAN COST ALONE DURING THE BATTLE OF FRANCE WAS HUGE"



casualties amounted to 66,426, with 11,000 killed, 14,000 wounded and over 41,000 reported missing or captured. Belgian casualties were 23,350, while the French suffered a staggering 90,000 killed, 200,000 wounded and 1.8 million soldiers captured. The material costs for the BEF were also severe, with the equipment lost including 63,879 vehicles, 20,548 motorcycles, 77,318 tons of ammunition and 423,630 tons of stores. 236 naval ships had been sunk or destroyed, and the RAF lost 177 aircraft in nine days. Hundreds more aeroplanes had already been lost during the Battle of France, and the front line home strength of Fighter Command was reduced to 331 fighters, with only 36 left in reserve. This was a perilous situation for the imminent Battle of Britain.

The Germans had also suffered grievous casualties of 156,000, but the starker fact remained that continental Western Europe had rapidly fallen to its knees in the face of a seemingly unstoppable German onslaught. Prime Minister Winston Churchill knew the situation was perilous and warned the House of Commons on 4 June, "We must be very careful not to assign to this

deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations."

Once he was safely back in England, Wright was sent with the remainder of the artillery to Woolwich and given 24 hours leave to visit relatives in Walthamstow. "They took me down the local pub and I felt awful. I felt like a coward because old boys from WWI were buying me drinks as if I was some sort of hero. Some had been gassed or were limbless and I felt like a coward that had run away. That was honestly my feelings; they were the people that I looked up to and I felt that I had run away and was a coward compared to them. But there you are, that's war."

However, despite his experiences in France, Wright does not blame his superiors for the Allied defeat. "We were all in the same boat; we just weren't ready for that type of warfare."

Wright would go on to serve during the Battle of Britain defending fighter airfields in southeast England and subsequently served in North Africa as part of Operation Torch. He then fought in the Italian Campaign at the Battle of Monte Cassino before ending his war advancing through northern

Italy into Austria. He had fought the Germans for the entire war but he is magnanimous towards his former enemy. "I had a sneaking regard for Jerry: the old Wehrmacht German soldier. The ordinary German was just the same as us, but the SS were a different crowd. They were nasty devils, but we had some funny ones too."

Dunkirk was a crucial moment of WWII and Churchill tentatively recognised its importance on 4 June 1940 when he stated, "There was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted." Soon afterwards the evacuation began to be referred to as a 'miracle' by the British people. It is a sentiment that Wright readily agrees with.

"I think it was – we came away to fight another day. It was only 338,000 of us that got away but it was the nucleus of the British Army. There's a TV programme now called SS-GB whose plot is that the Germans had indeed overrun us and what it would have been like here (in Britain). It's pretty gory, the way they just lift up a girl and shoot her in the head and throw her down. I think that's the sort of life that we would have had if it wasn't for the miracle of Dunkirk."

The ruins of Dunkirk after fighting had ceased. Hundreds of thousands of troops had been squeezed into a cramped area and the small town suffered huge damage

British soldiers dive to the ground on Dunkirk beach while under attack. Garth Wright recalls the sand would send the bomb blasts upwards



Above: A wounded French soldier being taken ashore on a stretcher at Dover after his evacuation

Above right: Exhausted British troops aboard a train having returned home from Dunkirk. Wright recalls feeling "awful" after his evacuation



ROYAL BRITISH LEGION

Garth Wright is a member and beneficiary of the Royal British Legion, the United Kingdom's largest Armed Forces charity. It upholds the memory of the fallen and provides lifelong support for the Armed Forces community including serving men and women, veterans and their families. For further information about the Legion, its services and how to get involved visit: www.britishlegion.org.uk



MASTERS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Greece and Yugoslavia were Mussolini's targets, but it was Hitler who – almost reluctantly – invaded them

WORDS SEAN EGAN

As far as Benito Mussolini was concerned, the masters of the Mediterranean were supposed to be Italy. Part of the reason for this belief was rational and strategic: should Italy take control of Greece and the Aegean islands it would be in possession of ports and airfields that gave it an advantage over the British.

The other part of the reason was childish and petty. 'Il Duce' often felt like the junior fascist in his relationship with the Führer and his hackles were raised by the German Government presuming to tell him not to stray into the Mediterranean until the nebulous date of Britain's subjugation. 19 October 1940 saw the Italian dictator writing to Hitler to crisply inform him of his continued ambitions to conquer Greece, which he advised him was "to the Mediterranean what Norway was to the North Sea". However, when Italy's armed forces sought to sweep over Greece just nine days later, they were efficiently repelled courtesy of British air support. An Italian counterattack five months later would fare no better.

Ironically, Hitler himself felt obliged to mount the very operation he had advised against. In the first quarter of 1941 Italy was flailing, fighting a losing sea battle against the British and facing defeat in North Africa. With Britain pledging further military assistance to Greece should it be needed, it looked like Greece might become a gateway for Britain to the European mainland after Germany had so successfully and humiliatingly hustled it out of the continent via Dunkirk. On 14 December, the German leader issued a directive for what would be termed Operation Marita.

Entry into Greece had lately been made notionally easier for Germany. Late November of 1940 had seen Hungary, Romania and Slovakia throw in their lot with Germany, Italy and Japan. As with so many pledges of allegiance to the Axis at that juncture in history, these ones had less to do with love of the policies and ideology of Nazi Germany than terror at the thought of being deluged by a communist tidal wave. Things got easier still on the first day of March 1941 when Bulgaria became another ally. The very next day, German troops were admitted to that country and allowed to march towards Greece.

While the Axis was gearing up to absorb the Hellenic Republic, Yugoslavia was being pulled



German paratroopers during the invasion of Crete

between the two war alliances. On 25 March it was announced that the country was now an Axis member. Yugoslavia had, for realpolitik purposes, leaned toward the Axis despite its desire to remain neutral, but this was an astonishing development. It lasted, though, just two days. A group of Air Force officers staged a coup and promptly revoked the 'Tripartite Pact'.

Hitler – increasingly agitated that his plans for invasion of both Britain and the USSR were being stymied and fearful of the United States joining the

fray – was incensed by this seesawing of fortunes. He ordered an invasion. As a consequence of the newly cordial relationships with Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania and the fact that the invasion of Greece was imminent, troops were available and in position for this purpose. On 6 April 1941, the Austrian-based German 2. Armee swivelled into Hungary to form the central prong of a trident that had the Italian army on one side and Hungarians on the other, a trident aimed directly at the heart of Yugoslavia in the form of its capital, Belgrade.



MASTERS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

In keeping with Germany's recent strategy, that central and main drive was supplemented by attacks on other flanks to which the invaded party could not afford to divert troops: Zagreb, for instance, was left largely undefended. These Blitzkrieg methods meant that even though the Yugoslav army was 1 million strong, albeit working with outmoded weaponry, it was crushed within days. The Yugoslav Air Force, meanwhile, was overcome within just 20 minutes, the Luftwaffe destroying most of it before it had even managed to get into the air.

On the same day, 12. Armee stormed into Greece from Bulgaria before splitting into two units. They were preceded by the Luftwaffe, whose dive-bombers ensured that much of the landscape the bifurcated ground-troop forces encountered was a smouldering wreck. A marine aerial attack was particularly devastating: two bombs dropped on that first day by bombers led by Hajo Herrmann blew up the massive British freighter *Clan Fraser*, which was carrying 250 tons of explosives. Also destroyed were ten other large ships and Piraeus, Greece's main port. The Greek army surrendered on 23 April.

Greece and Yugoslavia were to be the final countries Hitler conquered. Nobody at the time, though, had any way of knowing this. In the spring of 1941, the world could only glumly contemplate the prospect of yet more of the globe newly painted in the dread colours of the swastika.



Gestapo hangings of Yugoslavian resistance members, Belgrade, 1941



Temporary and uneasy friends: Prince Paul of Yugoslavia with Hitler in Berlin, 1939



German infantry disembark onto Greek soil from a Junkers plane, May 1941

CRETE 1941

WORDS JONATHAN TRIGG

The Germans launched the first-ever mass airborne invasion in history to seize the island from Greek, British and Commonwealth forces

Located 62 miles from the mainland, Crete is the second-largest of the Greek islands, a strip of land measuring 160 miles from east to west and just seven miles at its narrowest. Dominated by the White Mountains that form its spine, it has a rich history of invasion and occupation, with the Romans, Arabs and Venetians among others all having left their mark, especially on the likes of Khania, Rhethymnon and Herakleion on its more populated northern coast. Historically fought over, it had been a relative backwater for years until WWII erupted and thrust it centre stage in the spring of 1941.

The Mediterranean war

Fascist Italy took the lead for the Axis in the Mediterranean, its military weakness cruelly exposed by the December 1940 British offensive in the western desert that almost wiped out Mussolini's forces in North Africa and saw more than 130,000 dispirited Italians shuffle into captivity. However, with total victory within its grasp, British Middle Eastern Command was ordered by London to send its best troops to Greece, where an earlier failed Italian invasion had forced Hitler's hand.

On the morning of Sunday 6 April 1941, Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm List's 12th Army crossed the Greek frontier and proceeded to drive the British into a hasty retreat that ended just over three weeks later with the evacuation of the British force back to Egypt.

Not all, however, arrived in Alexandria – some were dropped off in Crete instead. There they joined the existing garrison and provided a much-needed reinforcement in numbers, but not much else, the defeat in Greece having cost the already miserly equipped British and Commonwealth forces 8,000 vehicles, 233 guns, 104 tanks and most of the rest of their heavy equipment.

Most disastrously of all, the Royal Air Force had lost 209 irreplaceable aircraft in the skies above Greece, meaning that it had barely a handful of modern fighters and bombers to support the ground troops and Royal Navy when aerial back up was proving to be crucial in the war as a whole.

01 GRUPPE WEST ATTACKS MALEME

Split into three, Gruppe West is the largest of the fallschirmjäger assaults and is led by the most senior German officer involved in the landings, Generalmajor Eugen Meindl. Casualties are catastrophic, with one battalion of 600 men losing 400 killed during the landings.

02 GRUPPE MITTE (CENTRE) ATTACKS RHETHYMNON

Landing in the first wave on the morning of 20 May, Gruppe Mitte is leaderless from the start when its commander, Wilhelm Süssmann, is killed along with his staff when their glider crashes onto the island of Aegina on the way to Crete.

Imperial Lion vs Nazi Eagle

Nevertheless, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill thought he had an answer – General Sir Bernard Freyberg VC. Freyberg was a living legend. A New Zealander nicknamed the 'Salamander' by Churchill for his determination to be in the heat of the action, he had won a Victoria Cross in WWI and commanded the 2nd New Zealand Division in the Greek campaign. Courageous, honourable and tough, he was also prone to mood swings and trapped in a WWI mentality that led him to believe the threat to Crete would be from a seaborne invasion. After taking over command he cabled HQ Middle East: "...have just returned from final tour of defences. I feel greatly encouraged... I do not wish to be over-confident but I feel we will at least give excellent account of ourselves... Crete will be held."

His opponents would be Kurt Student and Julius Ringel, the latter a bearded Austrian and fervent Nazi whose 5th Gebirgsjäger (mountain) Division was a late addition to a plan wholly of the making of his ambitious fellow general, Student. Operation Mercury – as the invasion of Crete was coined – was

7

4000 Evacuated
Night of 28-29 May

3

20 May

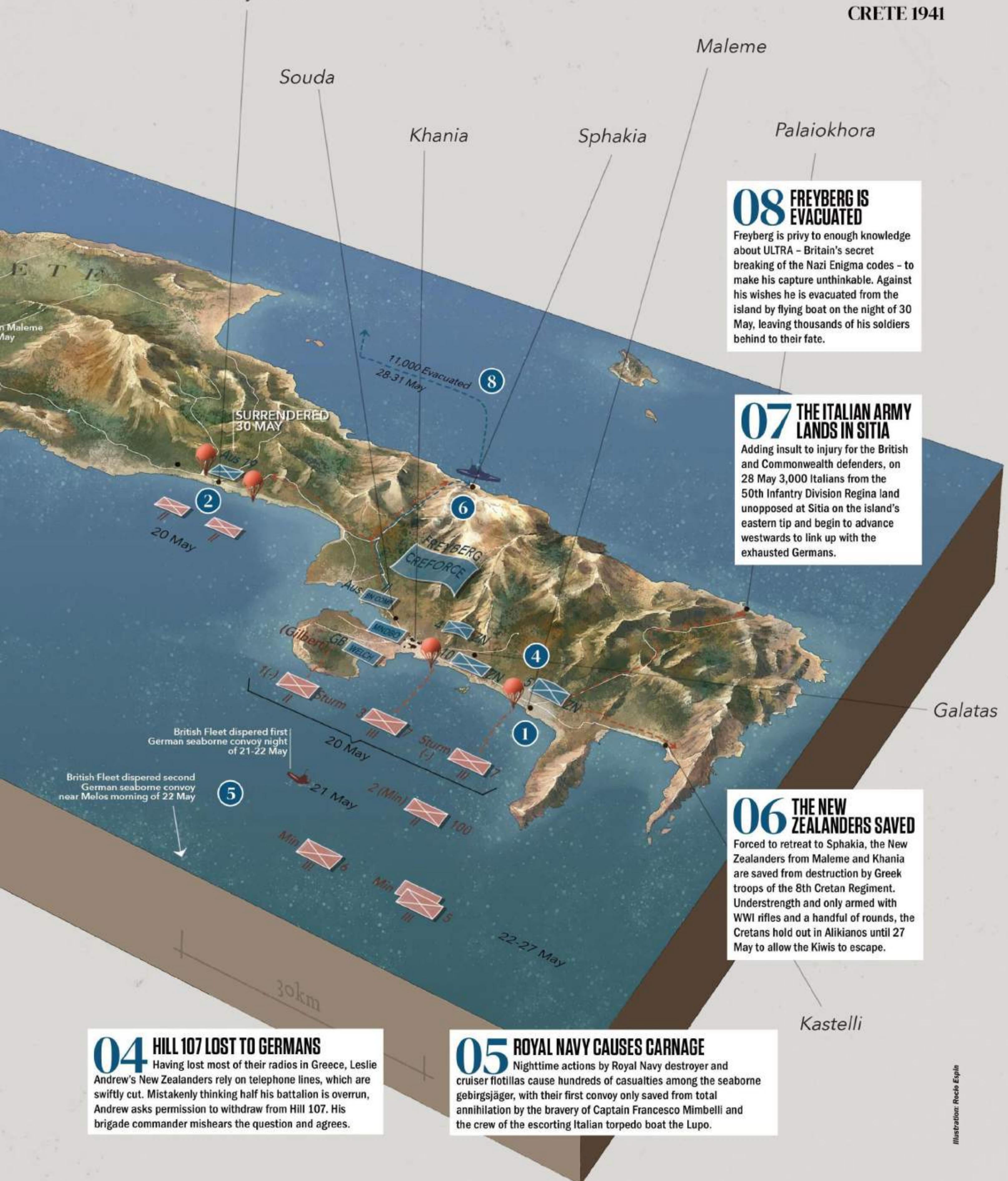
XXX
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STUDENT

03 GRUPPE OST (EAST) ATTACKS HERAKLEION

Scattered on landing, Gruppe Ost's commander, Oberst (Colonel) Bruno Bräuer, gathers as many men as he can and tries to capture the city only to be beaten back by the Highlanders of 2nd Battalion Black Watch.

Student's dream, the zenith of his belief in the ability of airborne forces to achieve victory through mass air and glider drops. Having only been formed in the late 1930s, Nazi Germany's fallschirmjägers (paratroopers) had achieved glory by carrying out a series of daring attacks during 1940–41, including the capture of Europe's strongest fort – Belgium's Eben-Emael – by a handful of glider-borne troops. Now, a year later, he was determined to show the world what his paras could do.

Briefed to his commanders in a second-floor suite of Athens' Hotel Grande Bretagne in "a quiet, clear and slightly vibrant voice", as one of them later remembered, Student's Mercury was a colossus. Split into three groups, the nearly



11,000 men of 7th Flieger Division would land and seize Khania, the nearby airfield at Maleme, and then Rhethymnon and Herakleion further along the coast. They would be reinforced by Ringel's mountain troopers, who would both fly in to captured air strips and be ferried in by sea. Student's intelligence head, Major Reinhardt, assured the assembled group that there were only around 5,000 defenders and the Cretans themselves would welcome the invaders – it would be a walkover. He would be wrong on all counts.

20 May: D-day

Well before dawn thousands of paratroopers heard the command, 'To the aircraft, march!' Each man held the metal clip end of the long static cord in his mouth, leaving his hands free to pull himself up into the belly of the aircraft. Then, he fastened the clip onto the jump-wire running at head height inside the plane. Each then took their seat, armed only with a pistol, all their other weapons and equipment packed into the four containers already loaded into the bomb bay. The containers would be dropped with them, but until they reached them the paras would be virtually defenceless.

The Luftwaffe had concentrated the bulk of its transport fleet of Ju 52s – 'Auntie Jus' as they were nicknamed – and as the 500 aircraft headed south the sky brightened, promising a hot, sunny day. Just after 0800hrs, as the Allied garrison stirred, Major Humphrey Dyer of the New Zealand Maori Battalion heard "a continuous, low roar. Above the horizon there appeared a long black line as if a flock of migrating birds... We looked, spellbound".

Onboard the armada the bulkhead lights were red – meaning two minutes to go – then they changed to green. Adolf Strauch, of the 2nd Battalion, Oberst Alfred Sturm's 2nd Parachute Regiment, recalled, "...we moved to the exit door on the port side of the aircraft... we could feel the air blowing in... he [our sergeant] flung himself forward and out of the machine [aircraft] to be followed by the rest of us in quick succession. When each man jumped the Ju bounced upwards a little as the load was lightened".

On the ground, Peter Butler remembered, "There was perhaps a minute's awestruck inactivity while people realised what was going on, then firing started from all over the area." Another defender said it was "like the opening of the duck shooting season... it was a concentration of some of the best small-arms fire I've ever seen".

What followed was a slaughter. The slow transports made perfect targets, with aircraft riddled by fire, dozens of paratroopers dying before even jumping. Those that did manage to jump were shot at as they floated down, unable to steer themselves due to the design of their parachutes. Many that did reach the ground were killed before they could arm themselves. Bill Ritchie

"LIKE THE OPENING OF THE DUCK SHOOTING SEASON... IT WAS A CONCENTRATION OF SOME OF THE BEST SMALL-ARMS FIRE I'VE EVER SEEN"

had just completed his morning ablutions when "a parachutist dropped near me and all I had with me was a spade; fortunately, I got him before he got out of his chute".

The 750 Germans in gliders were supposedly better off than their aircraft-borne comrades as they were fully armed and so could fight from the moment they touched down, but their wood and fabric gliders drew horrendous fire.

"They came in so low you couldn't miss," said Butler. "I saw one man firing a Bren [light machine gun] from his shoulder literally tearing a glider to pieces – bits were flying off it. It landed about 20 yards away and only one man got out. He made about two steps before he was cut down."

Large as the air armada was, it still wasn't enough to take in all the paratroopers in one wave, so that afternoon a second assault went in, to the east. They met the same fate. By now alerted to what was coming, the defenders mauled the slow-flying transports, with one gunner seeing "planes

burst into flames, then the crew inside feverishly leaping out like plums spilled from a burst bag. Some were burning as they jumped to earth. I saw one aircraft flying out to sea with six men trailing from it in the cord of their chutes".

In the balance

Miraculously, some fallschirmjägers survived the carnage and began to fight back. In isolated groups they took cover wherever they could and fought it out with Freyberg's men and Cretan civilians, who, far from welcoming them, were determined to wipe them out, as one group under a Lieutenant Paul Muerbe discovered to their cost: "The platoon... became involved with strong guerrilla bands... of 73 men, Lieutenant Muerbe and 52 men were killed."

Heartened by reports from across the island, Freyberg signalled Middle East Command that, although a hard day, his men had seen off the German threat. But a lack of effective communications and an inability to understand the





Victorious German troops march into Herakleion. The port city was a vital strategic target

type of battle he was actually fighting blinded him to the reality that it was far from over and in fact was being decided at the far west of his line at Maleme. Maleme's airstrip was the Germans' main objective that first day. Take it and they would be able to fly in the reinforcements and matériel that would win them the battle. Student knew this and threw everything he had at it.

The key to Maleme was Hill 107, a feature rising up to the west that dominated the area. Held by a single battalion, the 22nd New Zealand, it came under sustained attack from the start. Eugen Meindl – the senior German officer in the landings – gathered up every paratrooper, gun and mortar he could find and desperately tried to take it. Under immense pressure, and in a welter of poor communication and misunderstanding, the New Zealanders' commanding officer, the VC-holder Leslie Andrew, withdrew from the hill that night, and with it went any hope of victory. Counterattacks to retake it were later launched but not followed through – one supported by two Matilda tanks failed when one of the tanks broke down and the other's turret mechanism jammed at the same time as the crew realised they had the wrong calibre of ammunition. Freyberg, still obsessing over a seaborne attack, failed to see that with Maleme the Germans had already established a beachhead.

Battle at sea

The seaborne armada Freyberg so feared was a paper tiger. With the Kriegsmarine having no real presence in the eastern Mediterranean, Ringel had been forced to cobble together a makeshift force of some 63 vessels – mostly requisitioned Greek fishing caiques powered by a sail and a small auxiliary engine – escorted by a single Italian torpedo boat, the Lupo. Putting to sea, they crawled towards Crete at a sluggish seven knots, until on the night of 20/21 May they were found by Rear Admiral Irvine Glennie's three cruisers and four destroyers. Most of the terrified gebirgsjägers had never been on a ship before and now "the sky was filled with brilliant white parachute flares that lit up whole areas of the sea... shells began to explode on the caique... we could see our boys jumping into the sea... the lieutenant told us to put on our life jackets and remove our heavy nailed boots".

Another remembered, "Our caique suddenly turned over... and we were all flung into the sea... some of our casualties were caused when jägers were run down by the [British] ships."

The German fleet was effectively destroyed and hundreds of men were drowned. However, while the Royal Navy ruled the waves during darkness, it was a different story when the sun came up. With no air cover the Luftwaffe hunted Glennie and the rest of

OPPOSING FORCES



BRITISH, ALLIED & COMMONWEALTH FORCES

LEADERS

Major-General Sir Bernard C Freyberg VC
& Admiral Andrew Cunningham

UNITED KINGDOM
17,000

GREECE
10,000 (including 1,000 paramilitary gendarmes)

NEW ZEALAND
7,700

AUSTRALIA
6,500

TOTAL
41,200

ARMOUR
25 Matilda and Mk VIB Vickers light tanks

GUNS
Approximately 100 anti-aircraft and artillery pieces



GERMAN AND AXIS FORCES

LEADERS

General der Flieger Kurt Student
& General der Gebirgstruppe
Julius 'Papa' Ringel

FALLSCHIRMJÄGERS (PARATROOPERS)
11,000

WEBERGSGJÄGERS (MOUNTAIN TROOPERS)
12,000

ITALIAN ARMY
3,000

TOTAL
26,000

AIRCRAFT
570 (including Stuka dive-bombers, 500 transport aircraft and gliders)



Two Commonwealth soldiers
pictured in Alexandria, Egypt, after
being evacuated from Crete

Admiral Andrew Cunningham's force across the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean. HMS Greyhound was the first to be sunk, followed by two cruisers: the Gloucester and Fiji. Darkness brought respite, but not for long as five destroyers under the command of Lord Louis Mountbatten found themselves pounded by Stukas the following morning. The Kelly and the Kashmir were sent to the bottom in quick succession, and with their loss Cunningham felt the Navy's defence of Crete was untenable.

21 May: D-day + 1

Hauptmann Kleye – an officer on Student's staff – was sent by his boss to find out what was going on and landed at Maleme at around 0700hrs on the morning of 21 May. Although he came under fire he reported the airfield as useable, and from then on a steady stream of aircraft began to arrive, ferrying in desperately needed ammunition and

supplies, but more importantly reinforcements and heavy weapons. Most of those fresh troops were Ringel's gebirgsjägers and, supported by masses of Luftwaffe firepower, they began to roll up the British and Commonwealth positions from west to east.

Having come within an ace of losing the battle and the Third Reich's only parachute division, Student was left kicking his heels as the cautious and methodical Ringel took over the campaign. Freyberg's command was effectively split into three, with the troops in Rhethymnon and Herakleion caught in their own struggles as the courageous New Zealanders fought on in Khania. Helmut Mahlke was a Stuka pilot flying overhead: "At 1000hrs on 26 May we attacked an enemy tented encampment on Crete... we flew at low level up and down the roads, bombing any worthwhile targets and machine-gunning individual vehicles of every description...there was very little flak to speak of."

The efforts of Mahlke and his comrades were decisive. Constant air attack caused terrible losses and robbed the remaining defenders of any ability to coordinate their efforts and counterattack, and even if they had it begged the question: with what? They had hardly any heavy weapons, with most of their artillery being captured Italian and French models, many without sights or more than a few

A burning German Junkers Ju 52 over Crete. The loss of so many transports and their crews during the invasion was crippling and a major factor in the failure of the Stalingrad airlift 18 months later



rounds. Almost all their armour had already been destroyed or rendered unusable, they had no air cover, and even rifle ammunition was becoming increasingly scarce.

Crete abandoned

The same morning that Mahlke made his ground attack the exhausted Freyberg cabled Cairo: "In my opinion the limit of endurance has been reached by the troops under my command... our position here is hopeless." Shocked at what they regarded as a sudden turnaround in fortune, permission was reluctantly given to evacuate the island. The surviving troops from Khania headed south on the single road to the small port town of Sphakia. Mercilessly bombed and strafed by the Luftwaffe, a Scottish officer – Freddie Graham – described the hurried retreat.

"The road was jammed with troops in no formed bodies shambling along in desperate haste. Dirty, weary and hungry, they were a conglomeration of Australians, a few New Zealanders and British, and Greek refugees... a rabble one could call them, nothing else."

As thousands of dispirited British and Commonwealth troops streamed south, those at Rhethymnon and Herakleion bravely fought on. Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Campbell of the Australian 2/1st was leading his men against a German position in Perivolia: "Nine men were ordered to

"IN MY OPINION THE LIMIT OF ENDURANCE HAS BEEN REACHED BY THE TROOPS UNDER MY COMMAND... OUR POSITION HERE IS HOPELESS"

move to a low stone wall about 25 yards from the German front line... they raced along the low hedge to a well. The leader, Corporal Tom Willoughby, was nearly there before he fell. The man carrying the Bren went down. Someone following picked it up and went on until he was killed, and so the gun was relayed until it almost reached the well in the hands of the last man, and he was killed too as he went down with it. Eight brave men died there... the ninth man, Private Proud, was hit on the helmet as he jumped up and fell back stunned."

Even as Graham's "rabble" reached Sphakia the Royal Navy was steeling itself to run the gauntlet and save as much of the garrison as it could. In an heroic effort worthy of the finest traditions of the senior service, starting on the night of 28 May, Cunningham's warships evacuated almost 11,000

men from the southern port, and another 4,000 from Herakleion on the northern coast.

By the morning of 1 June it was over. British and Commonwealth losses included just under 2,000 dead and the same number wounded, with another 5,000 left behind to trudge into captivity, one of whom was Campbell, whose mighty defence of Rhethymnon counted for nought as the Navy was unable to reach him and his gallant men, forcing them to surrender.

Terrible though these figures were, they were overshadowed by the German tally. Some 6,580 men were killed, wounded or missing, half of this number being paratroopers killed on the first day of the operation. The Germans also lost some 150 transport aircraft, which would be sorely missed in the upcoming invasion of the Soviet Union. But it was the heavy losses among the ranks of the elite fallschirmjäger that were the most damaging. One of the best-trained, best-equipped and most highly motivated spearhead formations in the entire Wehrmacht had been gutted in less than a fortnight. One of their number who survived, Adolf Strauch, reflected on an operation in which "every third man had been killed, every second man wounded. Our victory was no victory". His commander, Student, agreed: "The battle of Crete... resulted in the loss of so many valuable parachutists that it meant the end of the German airborne landing forces which I had created."



THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK



48

Images: Getty Images

48 Desolating Deutschland

Determined to avenge the Blitz and disrupt the German war machine, Allied bombers pounded the cities and towns of the Reich without mercy

54 Churchill's Secret Army

Desperate to hit back at the enemy, Britain's Prime Minister demanded the creation of a lethal guerilla force that could take the war to the continent

64 The Assault on Fortress Europe

Operation Husky saw the Allies deploy courage and cunning to deceive the Axis powers and storm the beaches of Sicily

72 The Tehran Conference

A meeting of the three Allied rulers in 1943 would set the scene for D-Day and change the course of the war

74 Battle of Monte Cassino

With the enemy on the back foot for the first time, the Allies began their push towards Rome



54



64

THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK





THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK

DESOLATING DEUTSCHLAND

Inside the aerial bombardment
designed to shatter the morale
and materiel of the German
war machine

WORDS JAMES HORTON



The ascension and rapid development of aircraft throughout WWI was a revelation to commanders. While the opposing ground forces were quite literally dug into their positions, almost perpetually stuck in their trenches with machine guns poised to obliterate any poor enemy soldier sent trudging toward them, aircraft could pass relatively seamlessly overhead.

Aircraft were at first predominantly used as scouts, but they soon adopted the approach of manually dropping bombs on the enemy from above. Their bombing targets weren't limited to just soldiers but were expanded to include the munitions factories that kept the soldiers supplied. Aircraft were also sent after the civilian population, who in this new age of warfare were no longer safely secure behind the battle line.

Aircraft commanders sought to inspire terror in enemy populations, intent on breaking civilian morale and consequently collapsing the will of the government to continue fighting. And so they committed bombing raids not just over military targets but also over the heads of those who bore them no direct threat.

The German bombing of London, with the notorious zeppelins at its centre, caused significant damage to the city and claimed the lives of many. These experiences transformed the military strategies of air commanders in the peacetime years following the war. Many commanders became adamant that the next war could, and would, be quickly determined by devastating bombing campaigns.

In 1939, Britain was severely ill-equipped to launch major offences from the air. Despite the Royal Air Force (RAF) being one of the first to principally embrace a doctrine of bombing enemy production centres and cities as their main aerial offensive strategy, at the outset of war it hardly had the means to do so. Britain's aviation industry had fallen behind the times both domestically and for combat purposes, with the German Luftwaffe vastly outnumbering and outclassing anything

the RAF could muster. This did not prevent some cursory attempted offenses, conducted in daylight, when the Germans could more readily see them coming and strike back. Understandably these offenses resulted in failure.

More success was met, however, by pilots dropping not bombs but propaganda leaflets over German territories. These pilots were rarely shot down and performed their duties at night, providing valuable experience to the aircrew during these missions. The RAF slowly switched its preference to the idea of bombing raids at night but first had to revamp the planes, crew and airstrips to make them suitable for such forays.

By the summer of 1940, with this underway but by no means complete, a few stray German pilots dropped bombs on London. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had until that time ordered the RAF's Bomber Command to focus Britain's bombing efforts on oil, railway and aircraft installations in German-held territory. Bomber Command had also been busy with defensive duties, helping to scupper overconfident German land invasion plans of Britain by sinking and disrupting the transport of barges intended as troop carriers.

However, with his mind set on retaliation, Churchill redirected 80 bombers to Berlin, where the minimal damage to the city during the night raid was enough to spark outrage in the Führer. Hitler likewise adjusted his strategy to bombing cities, and the Battle of Britain began in earnest. This was a hard-fought campaign for both sides with exceptional losses, but by the winter of 1940 it was over, and the RAF and Bomber Command were very much intact. Churchill returned to the offensive, plotting victory in the war with a bombing campaign at its heart in a memo in 1940.

"The Navy can lose us the war, but only the Air Force can win it... The fighters are our salvation, but the bombers alone provide the means of victory. We must therefore develop the power to carry an ever-increasing volume of explosives to Germany so as to pulverise the entire industry and scientific structure on which the war effort and

Cologne was one of the most frequently bombed cities throughout the war, yet its cathedral survived



Source: Getty Images



THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK

economic life of the enemy depends." Oil, which was considered Germany's weak industrial link, remained the primary focus of bombing raids into 1941, but Bomber Command did occasionally attempt to eviscerate German towns with no strategic value throughout these months. Thus the double-pronged offensive from Britain entered full flow, where the bombers first attempted to remove the enemy's ability to wage war, and if they could not do that they'd set about targeting civilians so that regardless of their ability, the enemy would lack the spirit to continue fighting.

Britain's ally, the United States, entered the war with an aligned mind. The US's Army Air Force (AAF) committed 40 per cent of its warfare production to aircraft, with a mind to use strategic bombing as a rapid and relatively inexpensive means of crippling the enemy. The AAF flew into Europe with bombers boasting navigation systems that allowed for accurate bombing from high altitudes and inbuilt heavy machine guns so that the bomber could defend itself from enemy attack. The success of test bombing flights over the clear skies of the US southwest left AAF command confident that they would soon lay waste to the enemy.

The Germans had similarly demonstrated during the Battle of Britain that they too, like their enemies, held true to the doctrine that countries could be bombed into submission. However, both sides grossly overestimated the rate and magnitude of damage wrought by the attacks. The British Government had themselves witnessed their own population and factories endure multitudes of TNT dropping from the sky, and yet they believed that adopting the same approach would make for an effective countermeasure. Ironically, the bombing raids that precipitated the battle of the skies became a protracted and largely ineffective affair, much like the trench warfare military leaders were so keen to avoid.

The main reason for the failures of the Allied aerial assaults during the early years in the war was that commanders were wrong about both primary necessities of bombing. They believed that the bomber would safely reach its target and then destroy it once it got there. However, improvements in fighter planes and ground defences made flying a bomber a perilous act, especially during the day. Bombers were struck down with frightening regularity, and aerial attackers had to absorb terrible losses of both machinery and personnel. For the lucky groups who weren't destroyed by enemy armaments, they next faced the difficult task of actually hitting something. Night time raids severely reduced visibility and pilots were operating on often unreliable intelligence. On the off-chance a target was successfully struck by a bomb, the damage was not always definitive. Instead the effective German repair network would get to work restoring the industrial buildings.

The Germans also had a natural defence in the form of their weather. Bombing raids were hampered by cloud cover that limited visibility and forced pilots into firing range below the cloud line to get a sight on their target. The result was that bombs often ended up miles away from their intended target, or they wouldn't be able to find it at all. To make matters worse, sometimes the weather would not only form a defensive veil but go



In an effort to catch up to their enemy's standard, the British developed the Avro Lancaster bomber



An Avro Lancaster bomber unleashes payloads over Hamburg

Source: Getty Images

Operation Chastise

The first use of the 'bouncing bomb' was one of Britain's most famous air raids

Disruption of the German war machine was the primary directive of many air raids, and as early as 1937 Britain started eyeing up dams as potential targets in the event of war. In 1943 they decided to launch an assault against the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe dams, but this would be no easy feat.

The Sorpe was sheltered by steep inclines of land and a church spire, which obstructed the route to reach it. The other two dams were flanked on both sides by hills, similarly funnelling aircraft down a narrower corridor where German searchlights and flak weaponry could readily combine to shoot them down. As such a new type of bomb was needed, one that could allow the plane to avoid being directly overhead as the bomb was dropped and one that would effectively destroy the dam.

British engineer Barnes Wallis had developed such a weapon, code named 'Upkeep' and remembered by history as the 'bouncing bomb'. When dropped by a plane flying at 232 miles per hour and 18 metres above the water it would bounce on impact, skipping across the water. Upon reaching the dam wall, the spin of the drum-shaped bomb would drive it downward and it would then detonate towards the base, crippling the dam's structural integrity.

The raid took place on 16 May. The Möhne was targeted first and successfully destroyed after five payloads. The Eder also fell, while the Sorpe endured. The attack was not without losses, as only 77 of 133 airmen returned. However, while the damage to German industry was minimal, the successful attack was a great boon to the morale of the British people.



The drum-shaped bouncing bomb evaded torpedo nets by skipping across the water's surface

Tens of thousands of civilians were killed after 3,100 tons of bombs were dropped on Dresden

"BY THE SUMMER OF 1944 THEY HAD DECIMATED THE GERMAN AIR FORCE AND OTHER DEFENCES TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT THEY COULD CONDUCT DAYLIGHT BOMBING RUNS"



Source: Getty Images

on the offensive itself. Bombers struggled in cold temperatures, which plummeted yet further at night and could freeze oxygen systems.

The bombing campaigns stretching into 1943 did little to further the war effort for the British and Americans, yet many lives were lost. Defending airmen were killed, attacking airmen were killed, civilians were killed. Yet industrial centres largely remained intact, and the Germans' fighting spirit remained high. In terms of their intended objectives, the bombing raids were an unmitigated failure. But what these years of assaults did achieve is that the Allies took the battle to the skies, and they kept it there. Considerable German resources were drawn into aircraft production, denying them use elsewhere. And the mighty Luftwaffe, while a devastating offensive tool during the opening advances of the war, was forced to cater to defensive duties.

It was only when the German war machine began to stall as 1944 opened that strategic bombing began to truly flex its ability for annihilation. By this time, the Allies' aircraft had been significantly upgraded. Radar guidance while in the air helped with navigation, and fighter escorts had vastly improved range, helping them protect the marauding bombers. The Allies launched mighty assaults deep into Germany, and although their losses continued to climb, by the summer of 1944 they had decimated the German air force and other defences to such an extent that they could conduct daylight bombing runs. After being briefly pulled away to cover the land invasion of ground forces into mainland Europe, British and American bombers finally delivered on the promise made by commanders at the beginning of the war.

One estimate states that over 70 per cent of bombs dropped on Germany were unleashed in the final year of the war. Most of these munitions continued to be peppered onto industrial targets, but around 20 per cent were used to decimate German settlements. One harrowing example is the near destruction of Dresden in February 1945, when the previously unscathed city of culture was



Bombing formations

The different strategies of bombing raids used by the Allies provided unique flaws but shared failures

Although Britain and the United States held similar beliefs regarding strategic bombing, their methods of enacting this doctrine were, on a micro level, quite different.

The design of British aircraft that initiated the war lagged behind their American counterparts. Thanks to their superior engines and more accurate bomb sights, US bombers preferentially delivered their payloads from high altitudes during the day. Their bombers flew in close formation and were equipped with machine guns to fend off enemy fighters, in theory removing the need for a fighter escort.

British bombers were swapped to performing mainly night attacks, which, with the technology available at the time, made flying in close defensive formations too dangerous. Instead the British used a tactic dubbed the 'bomber stream', where aircraft would take off one after another and follow the same route.

Both these approaches brought their share of troubles. The Americans suffered by not having a fighter escort, finding it difficult to evade and destroy the nimbler German fighters sent to bring them down. The British, flying in individual sequence, were likewise vulnerable, as fighters could less readily defend their escorts.

The British bomber stream was particularly exposed when the Germans established radar installations. They scattered them across France and the Low Countries, as the route could be determined and bombers travelling across it were easily intercepted.

However, after the Allies re-captured France and Belgium, this radar-led intervention was negated, and the AAF started introducing fighter escorts to accompany the American bombers. These escorts included units of the famous North American P-51 Mustang.



The P-51 Mustang fighter was developed to help escort American bombers during raids



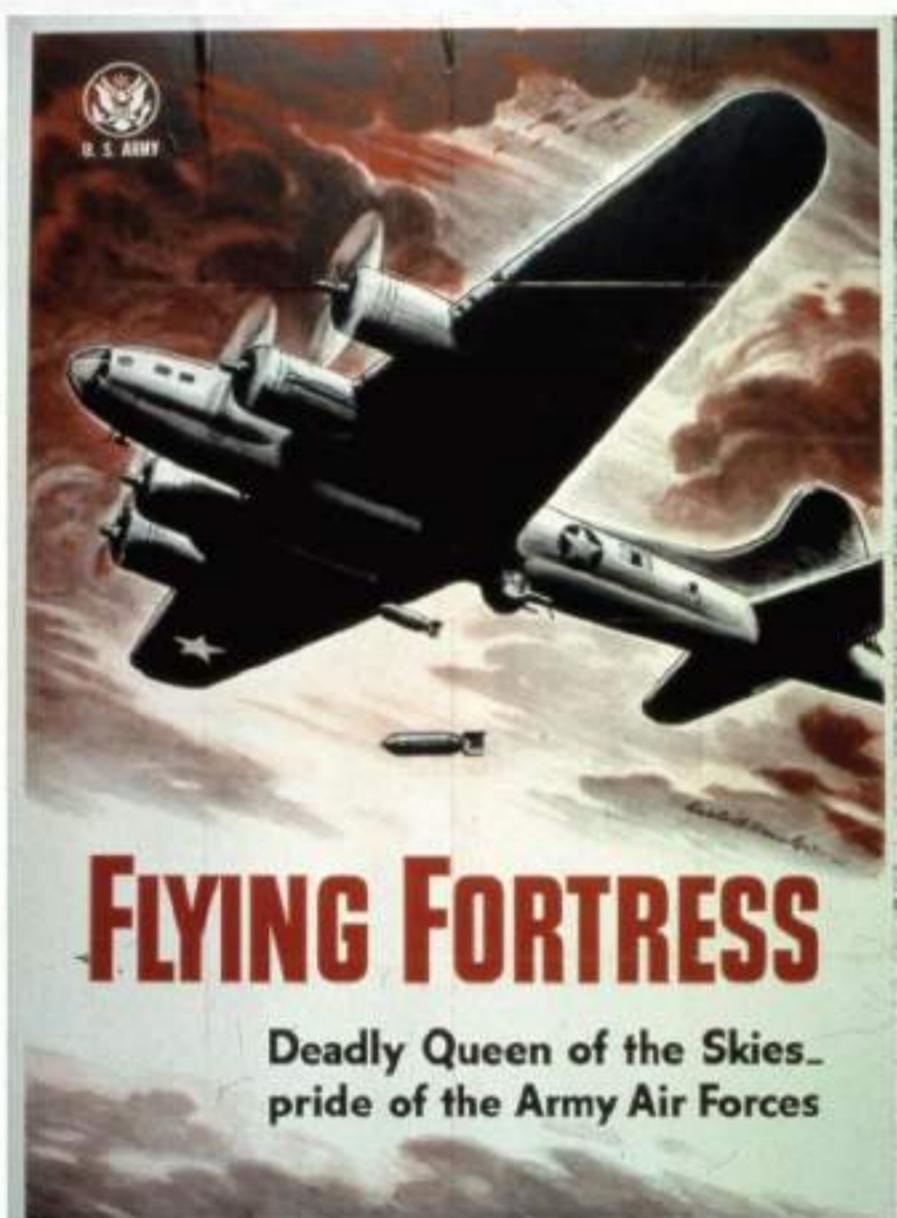
Many children were killed throughout the bombing raids on towns and cities



The effective German bombing raids on London during WWI helped inspire a belief that strategic bombing could rapidly win a war



Bombing raids were incredibly dangerous endeavours, as many of the attacking aircraft were shot down



Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress bombers were used by the AAF to perform daylight bombing raids



The atomic bombing of Nagasaki in Japan, witnessed from 5.6 miles away in Koyagi-jima

greeted by the sound of 800 bombers. British aircraft rained down around 2,700 tons of bombs that, after conspiring with the weather, set the city ablaze. This obliteration was followed the next day by an assault from the AAF, who topped up the damage with another 400 tons of bombs. Multitudes of historic buildings were reduced to rubble. Tens of thousands of civilians are thought to have died. This was just one example; the city of Würzburg was almost entirely eradicated, and Cologne was bombed more than 150 times.

Scholars are conflicted about the effectiveness of strategic bombing throughout the war. It had come at a high cost; both the British and Americans lost over 8,000 bombers apiece, with 64,000 aircrew casualties for the RAF and 73,000 for the AAF. Morally, some describe the bombing of civilian settlements as war crimes, especially as some estimates say over half a million German civilians were killed in them. It is worth noting that these attacks were indiscriminate, killing men, women, the elderly and children alike.

However, there are others, including commanders at the time, who argued that the approaches were necessary to end the war. The damage to German settlements was considerable, but a study by Steve Brakman and colleagues argued that this damage was at least temporary, as city growth managed to recover within a few years after the war. This was unfortunately not the case for several East German cities that fell under the rule of the Soviets, however, which suffered prolonged damage to growth.

But what of the goals of the Allies, to break the industrial backbone and depress the fighting spirit of the Germans? While the damage to industry was not defining, it certainly had an impact in some areas. In the war's latter years the Allies finally made headway with damaging oil installations and transport networks, hampering the German distribution network. There is also evidence that the destruction damaged troop morale.

"SCHOLARS ARE CONFLICTED ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STRATEGIC BOMBING"

As the bombs dropped and hammered factories, homes and families into the ground, dissension among the ranks began to rise. A recent study by Maja Adena and colleagues presented evidence that not only did officers in more heavily bombed areas show lower morale than their lesser-affected comrades, but top fighter pilots were negatively affected too. Those in the 'aces' (pilots that had registered five enemy kills, an immense feat of skill) whose homes had been bombed were found to have significantly reduced performance after bombing raids. This reduction in morale was fed and compounded by BBC propaganda sent out across the airwaves from Britain. In the same study, Adena and colleagues found that bombed regions that lay within signal range of BBC broadcasts were more rebellious against the ruling regime than those who weren't exposed to propaganda from the Allies.

WWII was defined by bombs in many ways. On the Western Front, both sides tried to pummel one another into the ground, reducing strategic buildings and innocent bystanders to ash. Death and destruction often occurred in the skies before these attacks could even take place, and what was an expensive and ineffective strategy at the outset of the war was refined into a devastating tool of destruction as the years advanced. German cities were eviscerated piecemeal, one at a time, hastening the war's end.

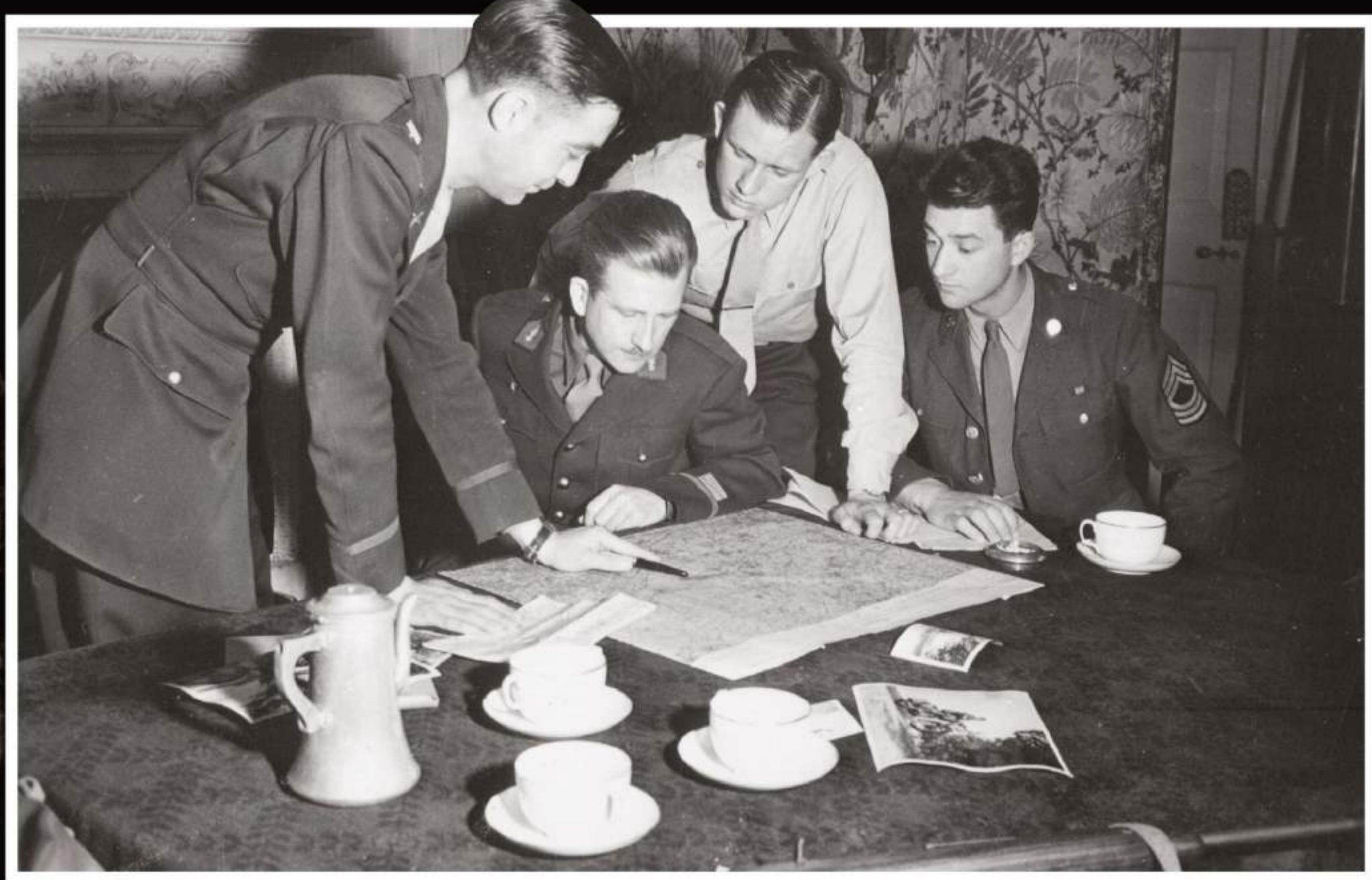
On the other side of the world, atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima conclusively brought that theatre of war to an end. One thing was clear as the terrible conflict ended: because of the bomb, war no longer just threatened soldiers on the front line.



THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK

CHURCHILL'S SECRET ARMY

In Europe's darkest hour, the Special Operations Executive not only inspired resistance movements all over the world but also played a pivotal role in stopping the Axis war machine...



Occupied France, September 1943. As an express train clatters through the countryside, a British spy code named 'White Rabbit' enters the dining car. It's mid-afternoon and the car's spilling over with French civilians, German soldiers, and SS men. It's a risk, but the spy, who's headed to Paris to meet resistance chiefs, hasn't eaten since breakfast. Even when the waiter tells him there are no seats, his hunger overwhelms his fear. He presses a banknote into the waiter's hand and asks him, in faultless French, to look again.

Moments later the spy is being led down the carriage to its only spare seat. Approaching it through a swirl of cigarette smoke, he falters. The table he's being led to is crammed with high-ranking Nazi officers. Turning back, he realises, will arouse suspicions. He'll have to bluff it out. So he sits, heart pounding, and shakes his napkin out. When he looks up at his fellow diners, though, he realises just how far he's crawled into the monster's mouth.

Sitting opposite him is Nikolaus 'Klaus' Barbie, the so-called Butcher of Lyon. The White Rabbit is about to dine with not only the most ruthless Gestapo chief in the whole of France, but the man who's been hunting him for almost six months...

This sounds like the start of a James Bond novel, and with good reason. White Rabbit's real name

was Forest Yeo-Thomas, and his escapades – like this encounter with the ruthless Barbie – were so extraordinary that some now believe he was the inspiration for Ian Fleming's 007. But there was nothing fictitious about his exploits, or the 13,000 other agents who also served in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the Second World War. Although details of their clandestine crusade would remain hidden from the public for decades, it's no exaggeration to say that without this secret army of saboteurs and assassins, the Allies might well have lost the war. By VE Day, the SOE had not only hampered Japanese operations throughout Asia but paved the way for the D-Day landings and most significantly smashed Hitler's hopes of developing the world's first nuclear weapon. Theirs was an extraordinary story. One that began in the entirely ordinary surroundings of a London office block five years earlier.

By July 1940 with its expeditionary force booted out of Europe, and the swastika fluttering over its allies' capitals, Britain stood alone. The mood in the country was apprehensive but defiant. Nobody embodied this better than Britain's new prime minister, Winston Churchill, and he was eager to take the fight back to the enemy.

One of his first acts as PM was to create the SOE – a covert organisation that would encourage

Above: Agents assigned to Operation Jedburgh receive instruction from an SOE briefing officer



THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK



"CHURCHILL KNEW ALL ABOUT THE POWER OF GUERRILLA WARFARE – HE'D BEEN ON THE WRONG END OF IT TWICE... HE NOW ORDERED THE SOE TO 'SET EUROPE ABLAZE!'"

Founders of the SOE

It may have been essentially a military organisation, but SOE was created and managed by politicians

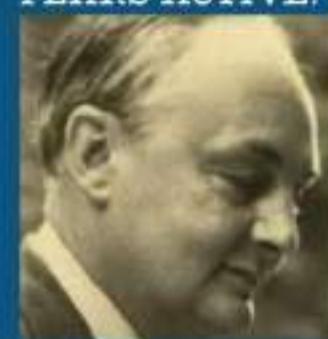
WINSTON CHURCHILL, BRITISH PRIME MINISTER, YEARS ACTIVE: 1940–45



Churchill's years as a soldier, politician and journalist meant he was well prepared to lead Britain through a war it was ill-equipped to win. The SOE was typical of the imaginative, often eccentric schemes he

green-lit. In its darkest hour, Britain became a place where all voices came to be valued. Oddballs, boffins and outsiders all thrived under his leadership.

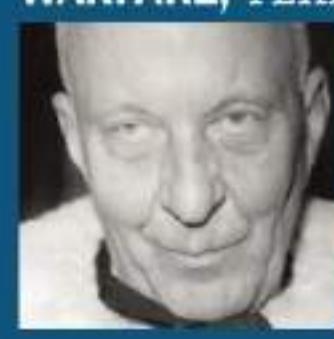
GLADWYN JEBB, HEAD OF THE SOE, YEARS ACTIVE: 1940–45



Britain's ambassador to Rome during the earliest days of the Mussolini regime. After the war he helped draft the UN's first charter and became its first Secretary General.

A career diplomat, Jebb was appointed SOE chief because of his background working with both the Foreign Office and MI6. Jebb also had first-hand experience of life under Fascist rule, having been

HUGH DALTON, MINISTER OF ECONOMIC WARFARE, YEARS ACTIVE: 1940–42



Dalton was given political responsibility for the SOE when it was formed. A decorated veteran of 1917's Battle of Caporetto, when the Italian front had collapsed under a ferocious Austro-German assault, he had direct experience of fighting against overwhelming odds. He was also a brilliant economist who saw both the financial and tactical sense of creating a low-maintenance guerrilla army.

widespread revolt in the occupied countries via a co-ordinated campaign of resistance. Churchill knew all about the power of guerrilla warfare – he'd been on the wrong end of it twice, first as a combatant in the Boer War, and then again as a government minister during the Irish War of Independence. He'd also been friends with perhaps the greatest guerrilla commander ever – Lawrence of Arabia, whose brilliant war against the Turks in the Middle East had brought down the Ottoman Empire. With these influences in mind he now ordered the SOE to "set Europe ablaze!"

The Baker Street Irregulars

Within weeks, SOE's HQ was established at 64 Baker Street in London. Behind its anonymous grey walls its founders set about recruiting, training and equipping agents who came to be known as the Baker Street Irregulars. From its inception, the SOE was split into two distinct divisions: one that dealt with recruitment, training and operations, and the other with support.

Recruitment to SOE was as unorthodox as the organisation itself. Because of its top-secret nature, it couldn't openly advertise for spies. Instead, candidates were sourced through methods ranging from word-of-mouth recommendation to recruiters studying lists of people who'd sent in correct solutions to the *Daily Telegraph's* notoriously tricky crossword. Potential recruits were then invited for an interview at a hotel near Trafalgar Square. Here, in a sparsely furnished room, they'd face a cryptic line of questioning during which the interviewer would suddenly switch to speaking either German or French. Anyone who became flustered was immediately asked to leave.

Specialist training

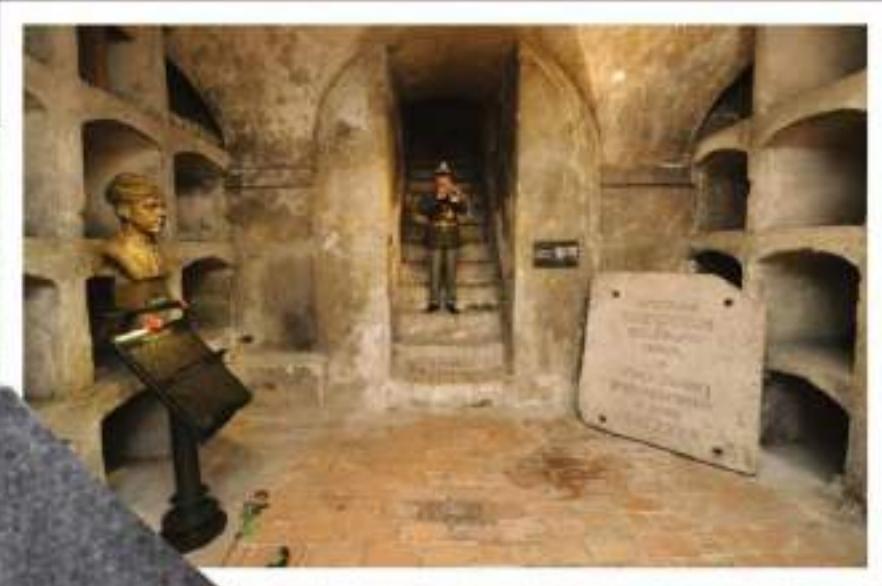
Obviously, being fluent in the language of the country an agent was expected to operate in was crucial, as was having a good understanding of its culture. Potential agents were quizzed about their background and what motivated them. Then it'd be down to the recruiter's judgement whether the wannabe spy had 'it' – 'it' being a unique kind of courage and resourcefulness that suggested they'd be able to operate alone, deep in hostile territory, and in constant fear for their life.



The blast from Kubiš' grenade ripped through Heydrich's Mercedes



Described by Hitler as "the man with the iron heart", Heydrich was feared throughout Czechoslovakia for his brutal methods



Heydrich's assassins fled to St. Cyril and Methodius Church, where in this catacomb they killed themselves to avoid capture

Operation Anthropoid

27 MAY 1942 • PRAGUE, PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA

A highly risky plan is devised to assassinate the hated Nazi governor of Bohemia, Reinhard Heydrich...

Having been abandoned by her allies at the Munich Conference, which had legitimised Hitler's occupation of the country in 1938, Czechoslovakia had been all but subjugated by the brutal Nazi regime by the time the war started. Initially resistance was scant – something the exiled Czech government was keen to change. The SOE devised something to inspire Czechs to stand up for themselves. What they came up with was both dramatic and dangerous – the assassination of the region's ruler, Reinhard Heydrich.

In May 1942, two exiled Czech agents, Jozef Gabcík and Jan Kubiš, parachuted back into their

homeland. On 27 May, as Heydrich was being driven to work in Prague in his open-topped Mercedes, the pair ambushed him. As his car rounded a corner, Gabcík stepped into the street with a Sten gun and squeezed the trigger, but it jammed. The car screeched to a halt and Heydrich stood up, scrambling for his side arm. Before he could shoot, though, Kubiš threw a grenade at the car. Shrapnel from the blast ripped through the car's body, mortally wounding the Nazi chief.

The two agents escaped – but only temporarily. They were later discovered in a nearby church and, after a six-hour gun battle, took their own lives

Right: Jan Kubiš was trained in Britain for the operation in Prague



rather than be captured. Nazi retribution for the assassination was horrific. Two nearby villages, Lidice and Ležáky, were falsely linked to the assassins so were flattened and their 500-plus inhabitants murdered. The assassination and subsequent atrocity, however, had the desired effect. The outraged Czechoslovakian population began fighting back against the Nazis in earnest.



After selection, recruits were trained at a series of secret locations throughout Britain. These included requisitioned country houses, factories, hotels, and even the National History Museum, where – among other things – agents learned how to pack camel dung, supplied by London Zoo, with plastic explosives.

The training schools represented three stages of preparation for life behind enemy lines. The so-called 'A Schools' were essentially paramilitary academies. Here, over a span of five weeks, agents studied martial arts, weapons handling, demolitions, map reading, Morse code and field craft, all against a backdrop of extremely intense physical exercise.

Once they'd passed this stage, agents had to undergo specialist training at one of the SOE's 'B Schools'. Initially, all agents undertook parachute training at what is now Manchester Airport. Parachuting was still in its infancy during the 1940s, and the type taught to SOE operatives was extremely hazardous. Because the planes they dropped from had to come in low to avoid detection by radar, agents were trained to jump 'blind' – namely at night with little idea of the area they were launching themselves into. Jumps were typically from around 300 feet and lasted just 15 seconds. Agents then had to land in such a way that the shovel strapped to their thigh – which was brought to bury the 'chute – didn't break their leg. Fatalities weren't unknown at this stage.

If recruits got through jump school unscathed they then moved onto lessons with subjects such as personal security, maintaining a cover story and how to act while under police surveillance. Agents were even taught how to break into properties, crack safes and pick locks. These were all skills that, in many cases, were passed on to them by ex-cons who'd been given reprieves in exchange for helping the war effort with their knowledge.

The final stage of training was at the SOE Finishing School at Beaulieu in Hampshire, where agents were taught acting and surveillance skills. Here each would be given their cover story before being schooled in the use of costume and disguises. The agents were then assessed in 'schemes' lasting 48 to 72 hours – effectively dress rehearsals designed to test their resilience and that of their cover story. The ability to bluff convincingly was seen as key to their survival.

Once trained, the agent was then handed over to SOE's support department to be kitted out. In the

Below: Radio operators were essential to connecting the network of agents spread throughout occupied Europe



Special Operations around the globe

The SOE harnessed the power of guerilla warfare to co-ordinate a widespread campaign of resistance

OPERATION CARTHAGE

1945 DENMARK

SOE intelligence helps a successful RAF raid on the Gestapo HQ in the heart of Copenhagen. Records are destroyed and several key Danish resistance members escape.

OPERATION TEMPEST

1944 POLAND

SOE agents are dropped to help the Polish uprising in Warsaw. After a bitter six-week battle it's crushed, partly because Stalin refuses to let the Poles be resupplied from Soviet territory.

OPERATION TYPICAL

1943 YUGOSLAVIA

Having initially backed the royalist Chetniks, Churchill switches support to Tito's Communists because they are "killing more Germans". This mission sees SOE agents dropped in to co-ordinate operations with the Communist forces.



OPERATION FALAISE

1942 MOROCCO

To monitor Allied shipping in the Mediterranean, the Germans set up an observation station in Tangier equipped with advanced night-observation equipment. SOE agents blow this station up just four months later.

OPERATION POSTMASTER

1942 GULF OF GUINEA

When three Axis ships suspected of transporting arms dock at the Spanish-owned island of Fernando Po off the Nigerian coast, an SOE-organised raiding party boards and hijacks them.

Operation Jaywick

1943 • SINGAPORE

Europe may have been the primary theatre of its operations, but SOE's guerrilla tactics were equally effective in the Far East

One of SOE's more astounding operations was carried out by a team of 14 agents led by Captain Ivan Lyon. The British army officer had escaped to Australia after Singapore had fallen to the Japanese, and he was determined to hit back.

In August 1943, Lyon and his Anglo-Australian force set sail from Australia in a captured Japanese fishing boat and headed back to Singapore. The epic three-week voyage took the team through 2,000 miles of Japanese-controlled seas until they reached a small island off the coast of Singapore. From here, on the evening of 26 September, the team crept across the channel to Singapore Harbour in three kayaks, attached a string of limpet mines to Japanese vessels in the port, then slipped away undetected. Around 50,000 tons of Japanese shipping was destroyed that night. Lyon was killed while attempting a similar raid a year later.



Singapore Harbour is seen here from afar, pictured in 1941

MISSION 101

1941 ABYSSINIA

Accompanied by Emperor Haile Selassie, Colonel Orde Wingate (later leader of the Chindit special forces in Burma) leads Assyrian and Sudanese troops against the Italians and liberates Addis Ababa.



OPERATION REMORSE

1940–45 HONG KONG

Essentially a smuggling operation set up to help raise funds for SOE activities, Operation Remorse deals in diamonds, foreign currency, rubber and machinery. It raised £77 million.

"THE TEAM CREPT ACROSS THE CHANNEL TO SINGAPORE HARBOUR IN THREE KAYAKS, ATTACHED A STRING OF LIMPET MINES TO JAPANESE VESSELS IN THE PORT, THEN SLIPPED AWAY UNDETECTED. AROUND 50,000 TONS OF JAPANESE SHIPPING WAS DESTROYED THAT NIGHT"

FORCE 136

1942–45 MALAY

Force 136 is the cover name given to SOE operations in Malay. Under the guidance of Colonel Spencer Chapman, hugely effective Chinese guerrilla groups are organised to fight the Japanese.



THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK



"SO GOOD WAS HIS
TRAINING, THOUGH, AND
HIS ABILITY TO BLUFF,
THAT THE GESTAPO
BOSS NEVER DOUBTED
HE WAS ANYTHING BUT
THE PARISIAN CLERK HE
CLAIMED TO BE"

Operation Englandspiel

1942-43 • THE NETHERLANDS

Not all SOE operations were a success. In the Netherlands the Nazis infiltrated a British spy circuit, resulting in the execution of many agents

In March 1942, an SOE radio operator called Herbert Lauwers was arrested in The Hague. Under the direction of German intelligence officer Major Hermann Giskes, Lauwers was forced to transmit messages to London feeding back false information. To alert Baker Street that he'd been captured, Lauwers deliberately left out his own security code when transmitting, but inexplicably the SOE's Dutch section continuously ignored its omission. Worse, they continued to send out agents and announce to Giskes, via Lauwers, where they'd be landing. Giskes called his counter-intelligence operation the Englandspiel, or England game, and he played it impeccably for the next 20 months.

It wasn't until November 1943 when two SOE agents escaped a Gestapo jail in the Netherlands and made it to Switzerland that London found out what was happening. The game came to an end, but by then some 61 agents had been arrested and shot.



Right: When transmitting, SOE radio operators would include a security code to confirm their identity and authenticate the message

James Bond books, 007 is supplied with a stream of eccentric gadgets by the Whitehall boffin Q. In reality, SOE's quartermasters supplied their agents with a variety of weapons that were, if anything, even more fiendish. These included exploding rats, guns disguised as cigars, and daggers concealed in pencils. Even itching powder was used, with agents managing to contaminate U-boat crew underwear and German army-issue condoms with the stuff. It is little wonder Churchill dubbed the SOE 'The School of Ungentlemanly Warfare.'

Behind enemy lines

As well as weapons, the support units also supplied everything the agent needed to make their cover convincing. That included forged identity cards, passes, ration cards and just about any other documentation needed to survive in Nazi-occupied Europe. Attention to detail was absolutely paramount. One missed number or misspelled word could cost an agent his or her life.

The same applied to an agent's costume. At the start of the war, operatives were given authentic clothes taken from refugees fleeing the Nazi tidal wave. As time went on, though, the SOE had to develop its own fashion department to go alongside its forgery office.

Tailors were drafted in who specialised in creating clothing made to continental patterns. Again, every fine point was considered right down to the buttons and zips. A 'Made in England' label could easily betray the wearer.

SOE's gallery of rogues

Misfits, miscreants, double agents and future Hollywood stars were all drawn to the ranks of the so-called Baker Street Irregulars

FOREST YEO-THOMAS

YEARS ACTIVE: 1940-45
British-born Yeo-Thomas spent much of his childhood in France and was immersed in both the culture and the language. His early life had been a heady mix of adventure and glamour. At 17 he'd escaped a Soviet prison by strangling a guard, but by his 30s he was working for a Parisian fashion house. Already a middle-aged man by the time the war started, he would become arguably SOE's most daring agent and, according to some, the inspiration for James Bond.



VIOLETTE SZABO

YEARS ACTIVE: 1943-45
Born in France of Anglo-French parents but raised in Brixton, South London, Violette Szabo was a single mother when she joined SOE. Her husband, an officer in the Free French Army, had been killed fighting in Egypt in 1942 shortly after she'd given birth to their daughter. Her first SOE mission to France was a success, but her second, after the D-Day landings, resulted in her arrest. She was executed at Ravensbrück concentration camp the following year aged just 23.



KIM PHILBY

YEARS ACTIVE: 1940-41
Kim Philby's notorious career in espionage began as an SOE "instructor in clandestine propaganda". With access to the communiqués from the Enigma code-busters at Bletchley Park, Philby was able to forewarn Stalin about both the German invasion of the USSR in 1941, and the Japanese decision to attack Singapore rather than Russia the following year as Hitler had demanded. Philby was later exposed as a Soviet spy.



ANTHONY QUAYLE

YEARS ACTIVE: 1943-44
Given the nature of the work, it's perhaps not surprising that a number of SOE agents ended up as actors - some like Anthony Quayle even ended up as Hollywood stars. Quayle was dropped into Albania in 1943. By then Italy, which had occupied the country for four years, had capitulated, and German troops were filling the void. Quayle was instructed to co-ordinate local partisan efforts in tying down thousands of German troops in this remote and wild part of Europe.



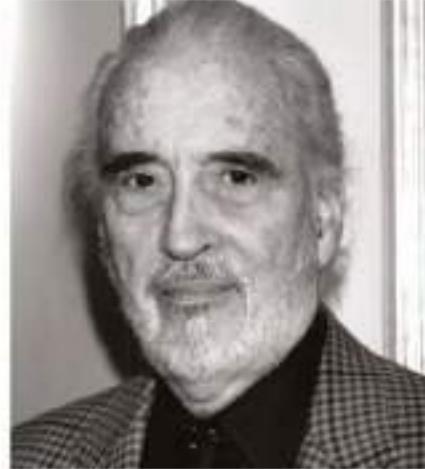
ODETTE HALLOWES

YEARS ACTIVE: 1942-45
French-born Odette Hallowes was a mother of three when she agreed to be sent back to her homeland to act as an SOE courier for a resistance circuit. Arrested within a year of landing and sentenced to death, she suffered despicable torture before being sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp for execution. She survived the war and remains the only woman in history to have received the George Cross - Britain's highest non-military honour for bravery - while still alive.



CHRISTOPHER LEE

YEARS ACTIVE: 1942-45
Best known for his villainous roles in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dracula* films, this Hollywood star was also an SOE agent. He served in North Africa and Italy but always remained secretive about the nature of his work. Although he once admitted to being "attached to the SAS from time to time", Lee consistently refused to elaborate further about his role within the SOE. Intriguingly, he was also James Bond author Ian Fleming's step-cousin.





Operation Gunnerside 1943 NORWAY

How a dramatic SOE raid on a remote Norwegian factory changed the entire course of the war



Left: 70 years after leading the raid, Joachim Rønneberg (centre) laid a wreath at the SOE agents memorial in central London



The Nazis used this Norwegian hydroelectric plant to produce heavy water – a key ingredient in the manufacture of nuclear weapons

In 1942 the Allies discovered that the Nazis were developing a nuclear bomb. Essential to that process was a chemical known as 'heavy water', which they were producing at Vemork Hydroelectric Plant in Norway. Clearly any success in this endeavour could spell doom for the Allies, so it was decided that the Nazis' stockpile must be destroyed. SOE was given the job.

A four-man team was parachuted into Norway in October 1942. In February 1943, they were joined by a further six agents and a raid on the plant was

planned. Not that reaching the factory was easy. Perched on a rocky outcrop, it was apparently only accessible via a bridge that had a 24-hour guard and was overlooked by machine guns and searchlights. The all-Norwegian team, led by Captain Joachim Rønneberg, however, discovered they could reach Vemork by climbing down the gorge and avoiding the bridge altogether.

The attack began just after midnight on 28 February 1943. The squad, having cut its way through the plant's steel fence, split in two.

One half stayed at the perimeter to provide covering fire in the event the raid was rumbled, while the other broke into the factory. Led by Rønneberg, it made its way to the heavy water store. Here charges were laid with just 30-second fuses. The team hadn't been detected but were determined to make sure the bombs went off, even if it resulted in their capture. In the event, the Norwegians escaped unscathed, and Nazi Germany was prevented from becoming the world's first nuclear power.

Operation Harling

1942 GREECE

Germany's monumental military undertakings meant its supply lines were particularly vulnerable – a fact that was not lost on SOE commanders

In 1942, the SOE was tasked with severing a railway in Greece that was a main supply route for Rommel's Afrika Korps. Led by Brigadier Eddie Myers, a 12-man team was dropped into Greece on 1 October with orders to blow a bridge along the railway's route.

Myers identified the Gorgopotamos Bridge, with its garrison of 80 Italian soldiers, as the softest target. Joined by a force of over 100 local fighters, his team hit the bridge at 11 p.m. on 25 November. Communication wires were cut and the garrison's outposts at either end of the bridge attacked. Resistance was stiffer than expected, though, and Myers had to send his saboteurs in under fire. It took them three hours to wire the bridge up, during which Italian reinforcements joined the fighting. At 02.21 a.m. the last of three explosions finally destroyed the bridge. Myers' troops slipped away having suffered just four casualties.

Members of the Greek People's Liberation Army helped SOE agents disrupt German supply lines



Once ready, agents were then dropped behind enemy lines where they would typically fulfil one of three roles: wireless operator, courier (a role often ascribed to female agents who it was thought aroused less suspicion), and circuit organiser (CO).

The CO's job was to create and manage a circuit of cells, each one made up of approximately 20 to 25 resistance fighters. To maintain maximum security these cells would operate independently of and know as little about one another as possible. The CO was the only person on the ground who knew everyone, effectively sitting on top of a pyramid that could contain dozens of cells and hundreds of members. That way, if one cell was infiltrated the whole circuit wouldn't collapse.

For the Gestapo, COs became highly prized trophies, and SOE operatives were trained to expect the worst if captured. 'Play for time' was the mantra that was drummed into agents at Beaulieu. If arrested, a brutal interrogation was inevitable, and agents were instructed to hold out for at least 24 hours in order to buy their circuit valuable time to get away and regroup.

By the time Yeo-Thomas sat down with Klaus Barbie in that dining car in September 1943, he was arguably the best-connected CO in occupied Europe. So good was his training, though, and his ability to bluff, that the Gestapo boss never doubted he was anything but the Parisian clerk he claimed to be. In fact, such was Forest Yeo-Thomas' chutzpah that he even grumbled to Klaus Barbie about how recent acts of sabotage – acts that he himself helped to organise – had disrupted the train service. The Nazi apparently promised he was doing everything possible to catch those responsible for the chaos.

At the end of the meal, the White Rabbit walked away. It would be decades before Barbie, by then living under an alias himself as a war criminal in Bolivia, would learn just how close he'd come to capturing his arch-nemesis.



SOE and D-Day

When the Allied invasion of Europe came the role played by SOE's guerrilla forces was to prove costly but vital

France was arguably the most important country SOE operated in. Not only did the circuits there provide intel that proved vital during D-Day, but once the invasion started the secret army SOE had nurtured there emerged from the shadows to bring down Fortress Europe from within.

During the evening of 5 June 1944, as the Allied invasion force neared the Normandy coast, the French resistance was called to arms by the BBC. The corporation's radio broadcasts had long been used to transmit coded messages to occupied Europe, and it now sent word that the liberation was coming. A carefully planned campaign to disrupt the routes leading into Normandy now began.

This tactic was designed to paralyse the German response, and although it was to prove

highly effective, it often came at a high price. The harassment of the SS Panzer Division Das Reich stands out as one such example. Stationed in southwest France, the division first tried to rush to Normandy by train only to discover all the local rolling stock had been sabotaged, so they drove the Panzers north.

Harried every step of the way, its commanders became increasingly infuriated and at the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in central France, on 10 June, a further delay resulted in the massacre of 642 civilians. Not that the hold-ups stopped. Instead of the usual four days, Das Reich's road trip took 15. By the time it arrived in Normandy the bridgeheads were established and the tide of the war had already turned.

MINIATURE MONOCULAR
Extending to 3 inches and boasting x2 magnification.



FAIRBAIRN-SYKES FIGHTING KNIFE



FP-45 LIBERATOR
The US-made single-shot Liberator pistol was designed to be dropped behind enemy lines in huge numbers for resistance forces. It was never widely used.



DELAY-ACTION FUSE
Different coloured ampules of acid dissolve at different times (often as much as a month), completing the circuit and detonating the explosives.



MCLAGLEN PESKETT CLOSE-COMBAT WEAPON
A weighted bludgeon, stabbing blade and wire garrote all in one.



COMPASS



KNUCKLE-DUSTER



THUMB KNIFE



Tools of the trade

Alamy: Corbis

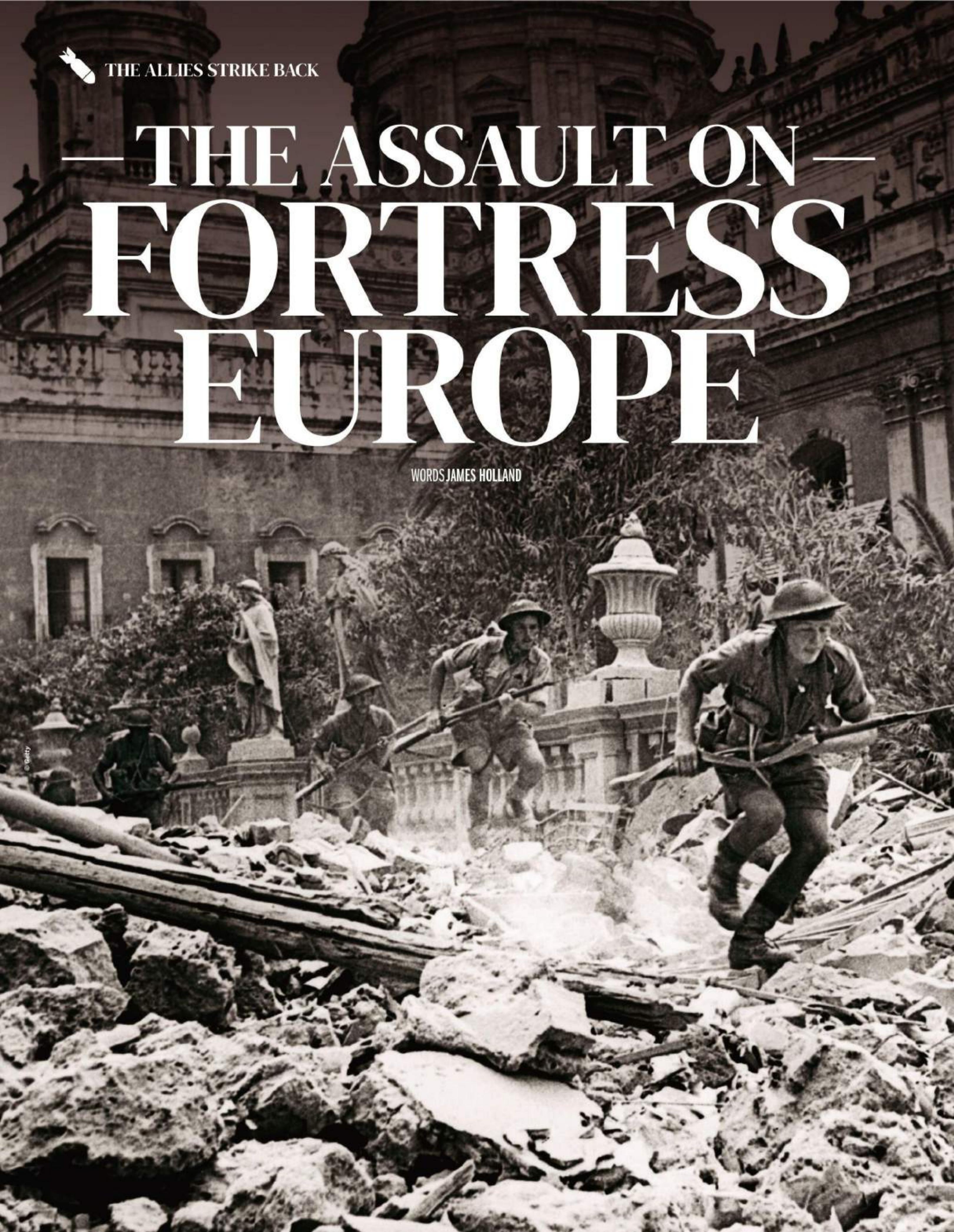
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THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK

—THE ASSAULT ON FORTRESS EUROPE

WORDS JAMES HOLLAND



A year before the invasion of Normandy, Operation Husky struck the first major blow on Axis soil, with thousands of troops battling against challenging conditions. Here, historian and broadcaster James Holland recounts how the Allies triumphed during this astonishing but often overlooked campaign

In terms of men landed in a single day, Operation Husky, the Allied assault on Sicily on 10 July 1943, remains the largest amphibious invasion ever mounted in the history of the world. More than 160,000 American, British and Canadian troops were dropped from the sky or came ashore that day, more than on D-Day in Normandy just under a year later, or in any of the island battles in the Pacific. It was a remarkable achievement and all the more so since Britain and America had, just three years earlier, almost no armies to speak of and almost no tanks, guns, trucks and other essential equipment. In many ways, the Battle of Sicily is the moment the Western Allies came of age. It was on Sicily that the British and American coalition began to operate at a war-winning level. Modern warfare by 1943, said General Sir Harold Alexander, commander of all Allied land forces for Sicily, was a correlation of "the three elements we live in: land, air, water. Army, air force and navy must become a brotherhood". At the time, it was only the Western Allies who were bringing these three elements together and it was to bring about a sea change in how they fought. Air power, especially, was a vital part of the pre-invasion operations on and around Sicily and continued to play a critical part throughout the campaign.

The 36-day battle for Sicily is an extraordinary story. Its conquest involved the largest airborne operations ever witnessed up to that point, daring raids by special forces, the harnessing of the Mafia, attacks across mosquito-infested plains, assaults up almost sheer faces of rock and

Left to right: Field Marshall General Bernard Law Montgomery and General George Patton



US paratroopers being transported to the Allied assault on Sicily

scrub, and featured an astonishing array of highly colourful characters, from commanders such as Generals Montgomery and Patton to the German Valentin Hube – nicknamed 'der Mann' – as well as a host of lesser-ranked officers and soldiers, such as Lord Tweedsmuir, the son of John Buchan; Philip Mountbatten, later to become the Duke of Edinburgh; and England cricketer Hedley Verity. The legendary Luftwaffe pilot 'Mackay' Steinhoff and the kilt and claymore-wearing Ernst-Günther Baade are two fascinating men who fought on the German side, while hovering in the background was Don Calo Vizzini, the head of the Sicilian Mafia, and Italian-American gangsters Vito Genovese and Lucky Luciano. There were life and death struggles across bridges, plains and mountaintops. It was a period in which Fascism was overthrown in Italy, Mussolini was toppled, and in which the pattern for the rest of the war in the West was irrevocably set.



Troops from 51st Highland Division unloading stores from landing craft on the opening day of the Allied invasion of Sicily



THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK

Sicily was, though, a terrible place to fight a battle and especially in the blazing heat of high summer. A Baedeker guide from the 1930s warned that no tourist should consider visiting in the months of July and August, when temperatures were blistering and conditions at their worst – and yet this was precisely when the Sicilian campaign took place. Certainly, it was a brutal campaign in many ways. The violence was extreme, the heat unbearable, the stench of rotting corpses intense and all-pervasive, and the problems of malaria, dysentery and other diseases were a constant plague that affected all trying to fight their way across this island of limited infrastructure, rocky hills, mountains and an all-dominating volcano. Endless dust, dry throats and thirst were constant companions to all those fighting on Sicily.

At the time, the campaign was the biggest battle being fought in the West and was on the front pages of newspapers and headlining news footage across Europe and the United States. The eyes of the West were on this Italian island, as were those of Nazi Germany. Today it is largely forgotten about, overtaken in the narrative by the battles for Cassino and more especially by D-Day, Normandy and the war in northwest Europe.

The Sicilian campaign also marked a period of dramatic change in the fortunes and tempo of WWII, which marked the end of the Italian participation as an Axis ally, forcing Nazi Germany to considerably extend its active participation on its southern front, as well as witnessing the first major amphibious operation of the war against a defended coastline, and the first coalition operation

"THE CAMPAIGN WAS THE BIGGEST BATTLE BEING FOUGHT IN THE WEST AND WAS ON THE FRONT PAGES OF NEWSPAPERS AND HEADLINING NEWS"

between the United States and Britain in which both nations fielded entire armies each. A major campaign with far-reaching strategic importance, it was also an important lesson learning exercise before Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944.

The decision by the Allies to invade Sicily was made at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, a meeting between British and American war leaders to thrash out a strategy to win the war in the West. By this time, they knew they must surely win in North Africa, and although it had been agreed that they would attempt a cross-Channel invasion of France the following year, in May 1944, there were very good reasons for invading Sicily.

Landing on the island would mean Allied troops would once more be back on European soil; it would help to hustle Italy out of the war for good (if North Africa did not achieve that strategic goal); and it would further tighten the noose around Nazi Germany's neck. In North Africa and the Mediterranean, considerable forces had been built up and they could not sit back and do nothing until the following May.

Complex deception plans were mounted, with a number of sabotage operations in Greece to help point to a landing there, and also Operation Mincemeat (a cunning plan that entailed dropping the corpse of a homeless man dressed in a pilot's uniform into the sea off the coast of Spain armed with highly classified papers detailing an Allied plan to invade Greece and Sardinia in order to distract the Nazis from the real target). Despite all the drama and intrigue of this highly complex operation, simple logic pointed to Sicily. Certainly, this was what Mussolini and the Italian war leaders thought, and was also what Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, the German commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, believed. It was true that Hitler accepted the ruse because it conformed with what he believed were the Allies' intentions and reinforced his paranoia about the vulnerability of the Balkans and especially the Ploesti oilfields in Romania, Germany's only source of real – rather than synthetic – oil. In other words, Mincemeat made little, if any, difference.

That Sicily was the obvious next target was due to the fact that command of the air over the invasion front was a prerequisite for any amphibious invasion. This meant not only having bombers available but also fighter aircraft too, flying protective high cover. Allied air bases on Malta and in northern Tunisia meant this could only be effectively achieved over Sicily; Sardinia and Greece were too far away.

Planning for Husky began immediately after the Casablanca Conference, even though the British Eighth and First Armies (which included US II Corps)



English troops take off in a Horsa glider plane for the military offensive in Sicily

THE ASSAULT ON FORTRESS EUROPE



A British Universal Carrier Mark I comes ashore during the invasion of Sicily



Crew of M4 Sherman tank 'Eternity' checking the tank after landing at Red Beach 2, Sicily, 10 July 1943

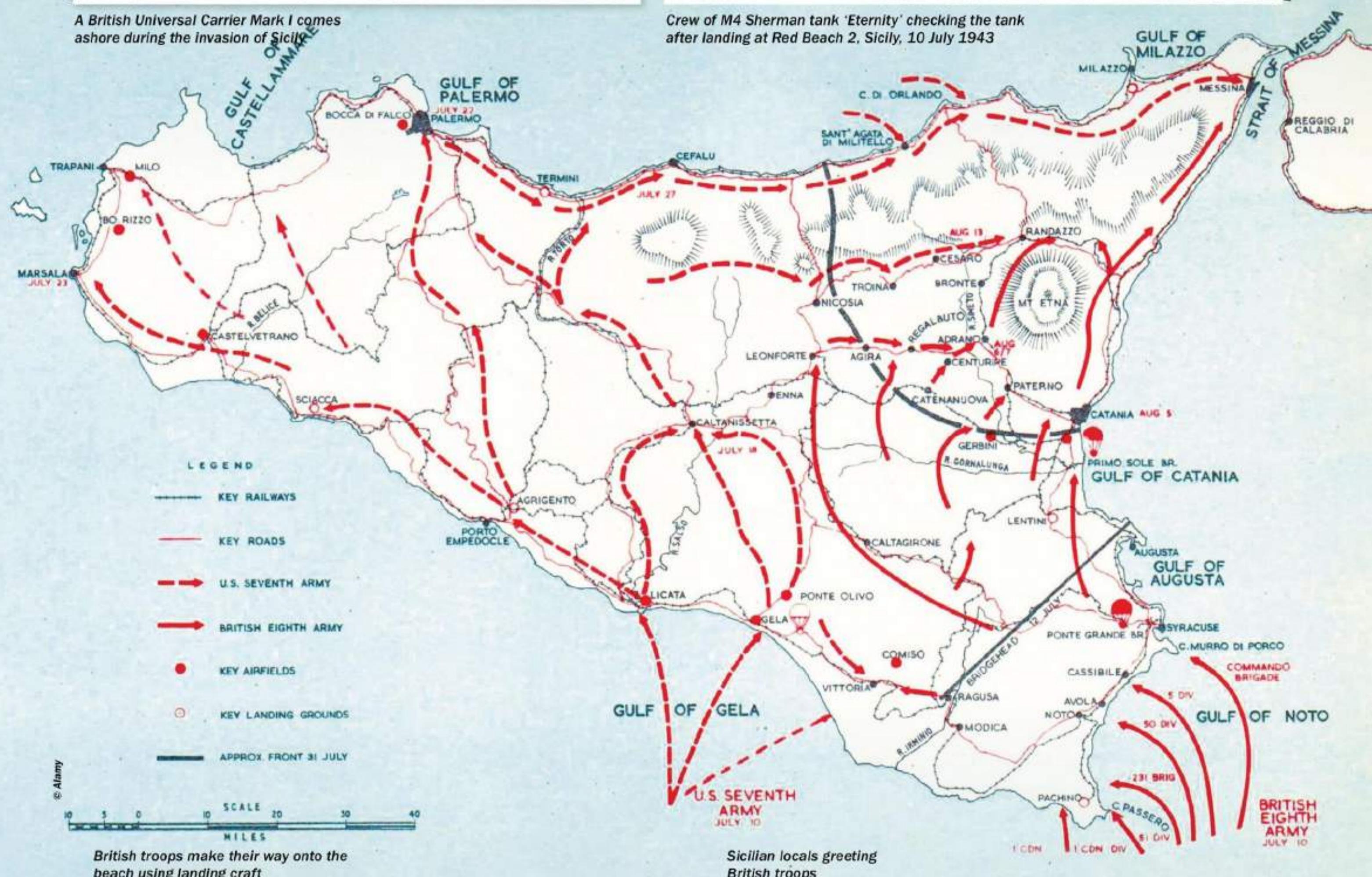


Image: James Holland



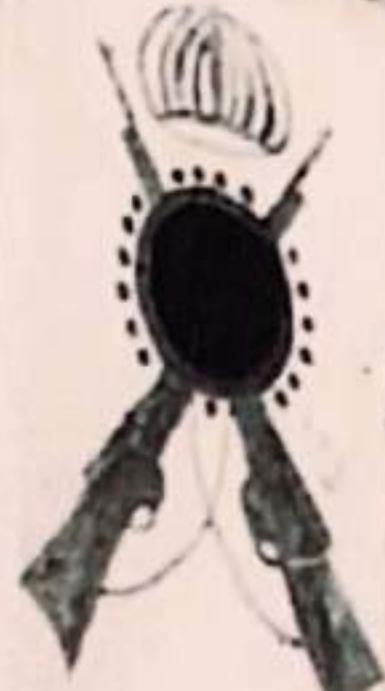
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DEI GIOVANI

EMO!

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US troops survey
the devastation
from Allied
bombardments



Image: James Holland

A knocked-out Tiger tank from 504 Panzer company





Image: James Hallinan

The town of Centuripe following the battle



British troops wade through the sea during the Allied invasion of Sicily

were still battling through Tunisia. The planning team established itself in Room 141 of the St George's Hotel in Algiers and was known as 'Force 141'. By the time a plan for the assault was finally agreed, it had already gone through eight different variations. The ninth plan was what was accepted, on Easter Day in April 1943.

Husky was a mind-bogglingly complex operation and drawn up while having absolutely no idea what the enemy reaction might be and while the commanders were still busy fighting the war in North Africa. This was not like Overlord, when the Allies had a fairly clear picture of what German troops were defending France and where they were based; at the time of planning for Sicily, both German and Italian units were still fighting in Tunisia and would continue to do so until 13 May, a month after the final plans for Husky were submitted. Even then it was still unclear what German units might be sent to Sicily. Italian forces were expected to be weak, although they had to be prepared for them to fight harder since they would now be doing so on Italian soil. The Germans, they knew, would fight determinedly and be absolutely no pushover.

The shape of Sicily and the location of its airfields and ports was another thorny matter. It was estimated Allied forces would need 6,000 tons of supplies per day but the biggest port, Messina, which could handle 2,500 tons a day, was the most heavily defended and furthest away. Palermo could handle 2,000 tons a day but was in the northwest, while Catania could manage 2,000 tons but was halfway up the east coast. The airfields were in the centre of the island on the Catania Plain or in the far west or southeast, so at opposite ends of the island. Really, the Allies needed to swarm the entire island, but that wasn't ever going to be possible.

Air power, however, was viewed as absolutely vital, and Air Chief Marshal Tedder, the commander

"SECOND GUESSING THE GERMAN AND ITALIAN DEFENCES AND THE REACTION TO AN INVASION WAS PART OF THE PLANNING PROCESS"

of Allied Air Forces in the Mediterranean, wanted troops to swiftly capture the airfields on the west, south and southeast all at once. On the other hand, the army wanted to land on as narrow a front as possible and quickly build up supplies from there. In other words, the differing Allied forces had entirely contradictory requirements. It was a conundrum that had to be solved.

In the end, a compromise was agreed. The British would land on the southeast coast and head straight to the ports of Syracuse, Augusta and then Catania and from there on to Messina as quickly as possible. Landing on the eastern side made more sense because Messina – and the supply route for the Axis forces from mainland Italy – lay on the northeastern side of the island. The Canadians would land on the southeast tip, while the Americans would land on the central southern stretch around Gela. It meant the airfields there and on the southeast could be captured swiftly, but not those in the west. Air power alone would have to deal with those.

Second guessing the German and Italian defences and the reaction to an invasion was part of the planning process. The single most important factor at this stage of the war was to ensure the landings were successful – or rather, that they did not fail. There could be no reverses. Not failing trumped every other factor. It also meant that General Alexander agreed with Montgomery to land as many troops as possible to ensure a bridgehead was quickly established and no effective attempt to

THE ASSAULT ON FORTRESS EUROPE

push them back into the sea could be mounted. That too, however, involved even more compromises, because for all the very impressive build-up of troops and supplies in the Mediterranean, there was still a limit to how much shipping and landing craft were available. Large numbers of troops could only be landed at the expense of large numbers of vehicles – the kind of vehicles that would then transport troops quickly up to Catania and beyond.

It was this decision that lay at the root of the subsequent slow advance inland. As events turned out, the British landings were easier than had been feared, but then the troops had to march north on foot until transport could arrive in numbers over the following days. By that time the Germans on Sicily had been reinforced and regained their balance, and resistance was considerably stiffer as a result. Consequently, front-loading the landings with troops was the wrong decision, but only with hindsight. At the time, the very real jeopardy surrounding the operation and the risk of failure outweighed the necessity to move north towards Catania and Messina quickly.

It is also this perceived slowness of advance that has clouded the Allied effort in Sicily ever since. At the end of the campaign, nearly 40,000 German troops managed to successfully escape across the Straits of Messina and live to fight another day. This, too, has prompted considerable criticism, especially of Montgomery, the commander of Eighth Army and in charge of the British effort up the east coast.

Such criticism, however, has been badly misplaced. A very quick tour of the island and its myriad hilltop towns, wide, open valleys and narrow, winding roads is enough to make any modern traveller marvel that the island was cleared of Axis troops in a mere 38 days. Throughout the campaign the Sun beat down on US troops on



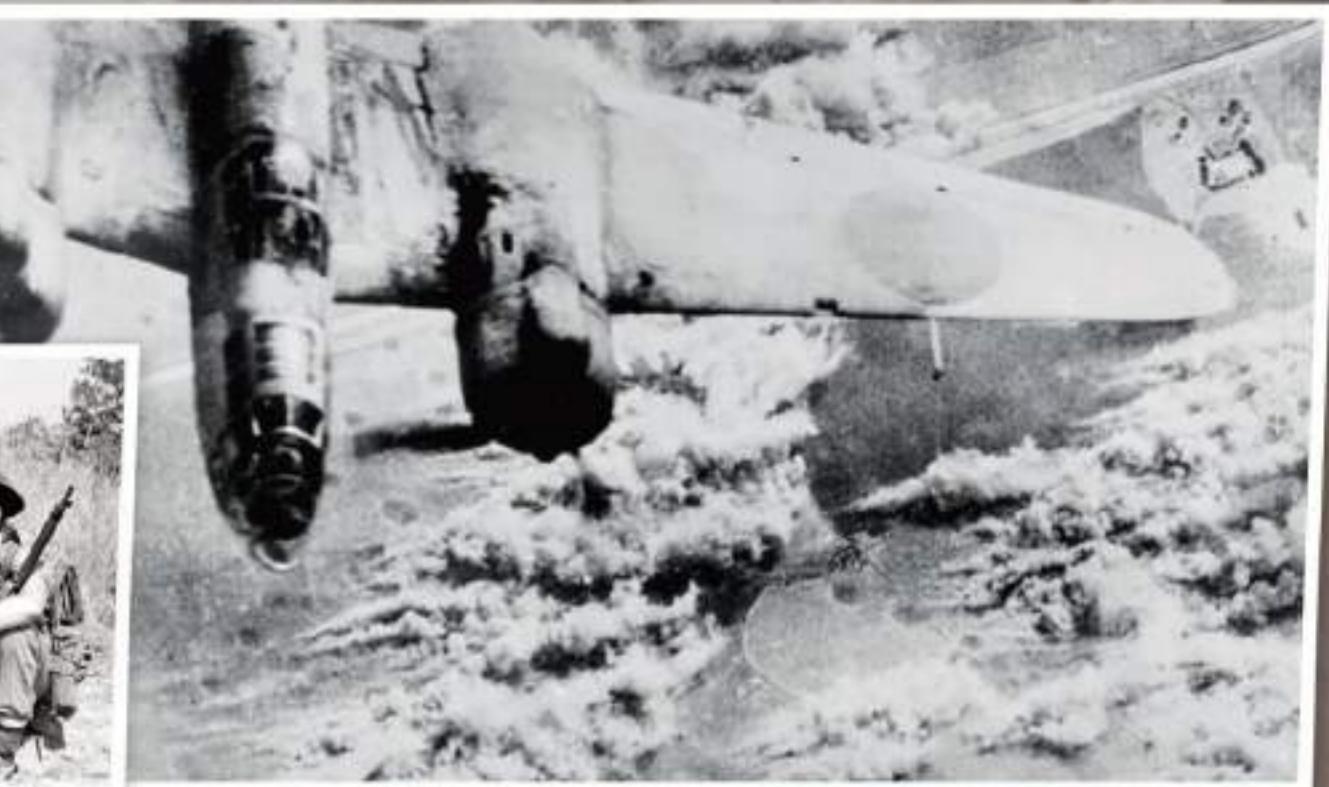
THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK



The carpet bombing of Castelvetrano



Soldiers enjoy a well-earned break during the Allied Invasion



A Martin Baltimore flies over retreating German forces heading for Messina



patrol in the streets of the harbour city of Messina, with temperatures reaching as high as 40 degrees Celsius. The dirt roads kicked up dust that could be seen for miles and which stuck in the throat and made men parched with thirst. Water was not safe to drink and water supply was a constant problem that troubled both sides. British troops caught in the Plain of Catania faced Germans dug in along the southern slopes of Etna, and both sides lost more men to malaria than they did to bullets, mortars or artillery shells.

Inland, away from the beaches and the Plain of Catania, the island was rocky, mountainous and an extremely difficult place in which to move, and especially so without being seen. The Germans, as they fell back, did so by taking one town after another. Because the only roads led from one summit to the next up winding, hairpin tracks, the Allies had little choice but to prise the defenders out one town and hilltop at a time. From the summit of each the next could be seen, and the next after that. Assoro, Agira, Regalbuto, Troina and Centuripe – these ancient hill-top towns saw one Herculean struggle after another, in which the Allies were forced to literally inch their way forward yard by yard against an enemy who made each stand on land of

“THE ALLIES HAD LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO PRISE THE DEFENDERS OUT ONE TOWN AND HILLTOP AT A TIME”

his choosing and inevitably with the all-important advantage of height from which the advancing Allies could be seen. While it was left to the Allied infantry to doggedly plough on, their only solace was the fire support they received from the air, especially from the artillery, who pounded the Germans in their positions – invariably the hilltop towns. Each was pummelled into rubble, homes destroyed and civilians killed, wounded or turned into refugees. Meanwhile, the Germans were struggling with ever-weakening air support and supply shortages and declining morale as it became increasingly clear the island was lost.

The Allies have also been criticised for allowing 39,569 Germans and 62,000 Italians to escape. However, the history of the war shows that evacuations were generally pretty successful. At Dunkirk, 338,000 Allied troops escaped; 42,000 out of 46,000 British troops deployed were

evacuated from Greece. Nearly 19,000 of the 32,000 Allied troops on Crete were also evacuated. At the end of the war, more than 2 million Germans were successfully evacuated from East Prussia and Danzig at a time when the Red Army was bearing down upon them. None of these evacuations took place at such a short crossing point as the Straits of Messina, which was little more than a mile wide, nor at a spot that was more densely defended: there were 333 anti-aircraft guns either side of the straits (compared with 135 along the Normandy coast line the following summer). It was literally impossible to stop them, and their escape made almost no difference to the subsequent Italian campaign that followed.

Furthermore, of the nearly 40,000 Germans that escaped, less than 30,000 were fighting troops, and each of the four divisions that had fought on Sicily had been appallingly mauled. Within a matter of months there would be 18 divisions fighting in Italy and some 24 by the following spring; those that escaped Sicily were hardly a decisive number.

Above all, Sicily '43 was an epic of human drama of both combatants and civilians alike. For all those who fought, died and survived this bitter struggle, it deserves to be far better understood today.

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THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK

THE TEHRAN CONFERENCE

The first meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin solidified an unlikely alliance

WORDS JAMES HORTON

In 1935, the country known as Persia was officially renamed as Iran by its leader Reza Shah, who was eager to mark a new era of independence. However, the outbreak of WWII risked rendering this independence rather short-lived, as both the Allied and Axis forces eyed Iran as a useful territory to occupy.

The Shah declared neutrality, but in private he favoured the Axis powers. Iran relied heavily on trade with Germany and the country had been occupied by British and Soviet forces in the previous war, an event the Shah had no interest in allowing to be repeated. Therefore, despite Hitler's offensive rhetoric about the inferiority of non-Europeans, the Shah's scepticism of the Allies kept them at arm's reach. He was right to be suspicious, because towards the end of 1941 he was forcibly deposed from his throne in

favour of his Anglophile son. By September 1943, Iran had declared war on Germany, Allied forces had moved in, and the country was being used as a conduit for the British and US to supply the Soviet Union. Then, on 28 November 1943, Iran became one of the most defining centres for the war. Not because armies clashed within its borders, but because the three mightiest powers of the Allies converged there for a summit that would seal their joint campaign against the Axis powers.

The war had been raging in Europe since 1939, and the British, Americans and Soviets had been embroiled in an allied conflict with Hitler's Germany for nearly two years. Yet neither Prime Minister Winston Churchill nor President Franklin D. Roosevelt had ever met Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin. Churchill and Roosevelt

were reluctant allies with the Soviets,

thrust together by their mutual enemy of the Axis powers. But the 'Big Three' powers were in an apt position to meet when they did. The tide had slowly been turning against the Germans, who had faced serious reversals in their invasion of the Soviet Union, and had been bullied out of Africa by the British and American forces. The three leaders felt it was time to meet in person to not only solidify their war effort and bring the conflict to a victorious conclusion but to discuss the fates of the soon-to-be liberated lands held by the Germans.

Stalin arrived at the conference primarily concerned with the Germans, who had invaded his territory, attempted to capture his capital, and until recently had seized much of the Caucasus. The Soviet Union was at that time the only Allied power waging a land war against Germany on European soil, and Stalin wanted his Western comrades to open a new front on Hitler's other flank. But



General Secretary Joseph Stalin, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Tehran Conference

THE TEHRAN CONFERENCE

Stalin's ambitions did not end there; he also had a strong interest in the fates of his neighbouring states in Eastern Europe. Stalin was aware that his Western allies may prove to be only temporary, and therefore he wanted to wed them to concessions while they still needed him and his army.

Roosevelt arrived with an agenda that was equally concerned with the other major Axis power, Japan. He wanted the Soviets to commit to the Eastern theatre and engage with the Japanese towards the Pacific. Churchill, for his part, was keen on a joint Anglo-American land invasion into northwestern mainland Europe. But he also wanted to invest resources into opening a Mediterranean theatre of war that attacked north through Italy.

The summit took place with jovial interactions between the leaders and their advisors, with Churchill keen to impress with his wit and Roosevelt eager to accommodate. Such was the charm offensive from the Western allies that

Churchill gifted Stalin, on behalf of King George VI, a ceremonial longsword – the Sword of Stalingrad – made for the 'Man of Steel' himself. But these friendly interactions did not distract Stalin from his agenda. He was recorded as being forceful and calculating throughout the talks and emerged the clear winner after successfully dividing the other two leaders.

Churchill's second theatre in the Mediterranean was flatly refused by Stalin, who received backing on this account from Roosevelt. Correctly sensing that the US leader would acquiesce to his more audacious terms, the Soviet leader also secured acceptance that following the war Poland would become a Soviet 'client state'. Soviet borders would also expand into Poland, and in return Poland's borders would extend into Germany.

However, all three leaders left with their major aims achieved. The most notable of these agreements was that Britain and the US would

invade France by May the following year from both the north and south. In return, Stalin would draw forces away from the invasion points by launching major offensives on the Eastern Front. Stalin also agreed to join the war against Japan once Germany had been defeated.

The three leaders left the summit on 1 December aware that they'd enjoyed different degrees of success. Stalin was likely the winner, but the agreements between the three at least ensured that the Axis powers would be the ones who ultimately lost.

"HE ALSO WANTED TO INVEST RESOURCES INTO OPENING A MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE OF WAR THAT ATTACKED NORTH THROUGH ITALY"

The conference laid the groundwork for Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of France in June 1944





THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK

THE BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

ITALY 11 JANUARY - 18 MAY 1944

A small Italian town held the key to the advance on Rome, and the Germans were not about to give it up without a fight

WORDS DAVID SMITH



A British Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft gun amid the ruins of Cassino

Following the collapse of the German position in North Africa in May 1943, the Allies were faced with a dilemma. An invasion of France was not yet a realistic proposition, but the fight had to be taken to continental Europe somehow.

A compromise was reached between the British and Americans: Italy would offer a convenient route into Europe, being just a short hop across the Mediterranean. There was an idea that Italy was in some way the 'soft underbelly' of Hitler's Europe, and that notion was not outlandish while the country was held by Italian troops.

The initial landing at Sicily was badly managed and around 100,000 German and Italian troops escaped. However, the fall of Mussolini's regime in July led the Italians to open negotiations with the Allies. A race ensued, one that the Allies mishandled. While they dithered, the Germans poured more troops into Italy. The stage was set for some of the hardest fighting of the entire war.

The German strategy was to force the Allies to fight for every inch while staging organised withdrawals to a series of defensive lines. The most formidable of these, the Gustav Line, was to be held with even greater determination.

The most obvious route to Rome was along Route 6, the Via Casilina, which cut through the narrow Liri Valley. To break through into the valley, however, the Allies had to get past two formidable 'gateposts', Monte Maio and Monte Cassino. Cassino would be the scene of fighting that some compared to the worst experienced in WWI. Four separate attempts, spanning 129 days, would be made to wrest the town from the Germans.

The battered town under another bombardment during the repeated Allied assaults



German troops turned the ruined town into a defensive strongpoint

On the night of 11–12 January 1944, the first battle opened. Men of the French Expeditionary Corps (Moroccans and Algerians under Marshal Alphonse Juin) attacked to the north and made good progress. Juin, in fact, was convinced after six

days of fighting that if he was reinforced he could break through into the Liri Valley and unpick the entire Gustav Line.

General Mark Clark, commanding the US Fifth Army, was unimpressed and instead pressed on with his original plan. British X Corps units crossed the Carigliano River close to the coast but were met by a fierce counterattack as soon as they reached the opposite bank. The German 94th Division, reinforced by tanks, held firm and were helped when further British crossings were foiled by bad weather and a swollen river. Clark then chose to press ahead with the third phase of his attack, unleashing the US 36th Division across the Gari River, but this was a disaster, with half of the men who managed to get over the river either killed, wounded or captured.

Still, the First Battle of Monte Cassino lurched on. Partly to distract from the major Allied landings at Anzio on 22 January, Clark probed further north with the men of Juin's FEC and the US 34th Division. Little impact was made on the German defences (although men of the 34th Division came agonisingly close to the walls of the ancient monastery atop Monte Cassino) and the first battle fizzled out.

The landings at Anzio were a complete success and ought to have undermined the entire Gustav Line, but the commander of US VI Corps, General John P. Lucas, was overly cautious and frittered away his advantage, eventually getting bogged down as German forces responded to his surprise arrival. A great opportunity had been lost, and Cassino would need to be attacked again.

More troops had been made available, with the shifting over of three divisions from the British Eighth Army. The 2nd New Zealand, 78th British and 4th Indian Divisions were grouped into II NZ Corps under the command of General Bernard



THE ALLIES STRIKE BACK



German Fallschirmjäger (paratroop) units offered tough opposition to the Allied forces



The shattered remnants of the monastery after repeated Allied bombardments



Freyberg. These men would fight the Second Battle of Monte Cassino.

It would kick off with one of the most controversial episodes of the campaign. The monastery on top of the hill was considered of vital cultural importance and the Germans assured the Allies that they had not and would not occupy it. Clark took them at their word, but Freyberg was unconvinced. Feeling sure the Germans would have placed units in the monastery, he insisted that it be destroyed by aerial bombardment, on 15 February, prior to his assault. The Germans, in fact, had been telling the truth, but after the monastery had been flattened by waves of heavy bombers (at a cost of around a hundred civilian lives), they no longer felt obliged to respect what was now a pile of rubble. The ruins of the monastery became a formidable

defensive position, and General Fridolin von Senger summed up the situation when he commented, "The bombing had the opposite effect to what was intended. Now we would occupy the abbey without scruple, especially as ruins are better for defence than intact buildings."

Marshal Juin, commander of the FEC, still had hopes of breaking through into the Liri Valley and asked for II NZ Corps to join with his forces, but Clark again demurred. The subsequent attack of the mixed New Zealand-Indian-British corps faltered and then failed as it proved impossible to bring its full weight to bear on the German defences. The Second Battle of Monte Cassino was another failure. By now it was clear that a more concerted effort was needed to crack the German position. The decision was taken to bring in yet more men and await better weather in May, enabling the Allies to make better use of tanks. To fill the pause, however, and to ensure the Germans kept their attention on the Gustav Line while plans for Operation Overlord were completed, a third assault was improvised.

Operation Dickens, which spawned the Third Battle of Monte Cassino, was therefore little more than a placeholder. Starting on 15 March, it again opened with a massive aerial bombardment, this time hitting the entire town. General Freyberg had

once more insisted on this display of aerial power, but the 600 Allied bombers failed to achieve much. A three-hour artillery bombardment after the bombing presented the Germans with yet more defensible piles of rubble, and although they were living through hellish conditions, their morale remained unbroken. Taking cover in cellars, which sometimes became tombs, the Germans were mostly able to scramble out of their improvised shelters in time to meet their advancing foe.

When Allied tanks attempted to roll into Cassino once the guns had fallen silent, they found progress agonisingly slow because the roads were all blocked. A single German Panzer IV, well sited and under cover, knocked out one Sherman tank after another as they attempted to pick their way through the debris. Bulldozers were called up to clear the way, but they came under heavy fire themselves, and when the rains returned the battle became a brutal slogging match.

The town was gradually occupied, but tank attacks then failed badly due to poor planning. Advancing without infantry support, the tanks were massacred and the assault was called off. Operation Diadem promised to finally end the stalemate. This was to be on a completely different scale to the first three battles, with 108 battalions and 2,000 tanks attacking on a 20-mile front. As if

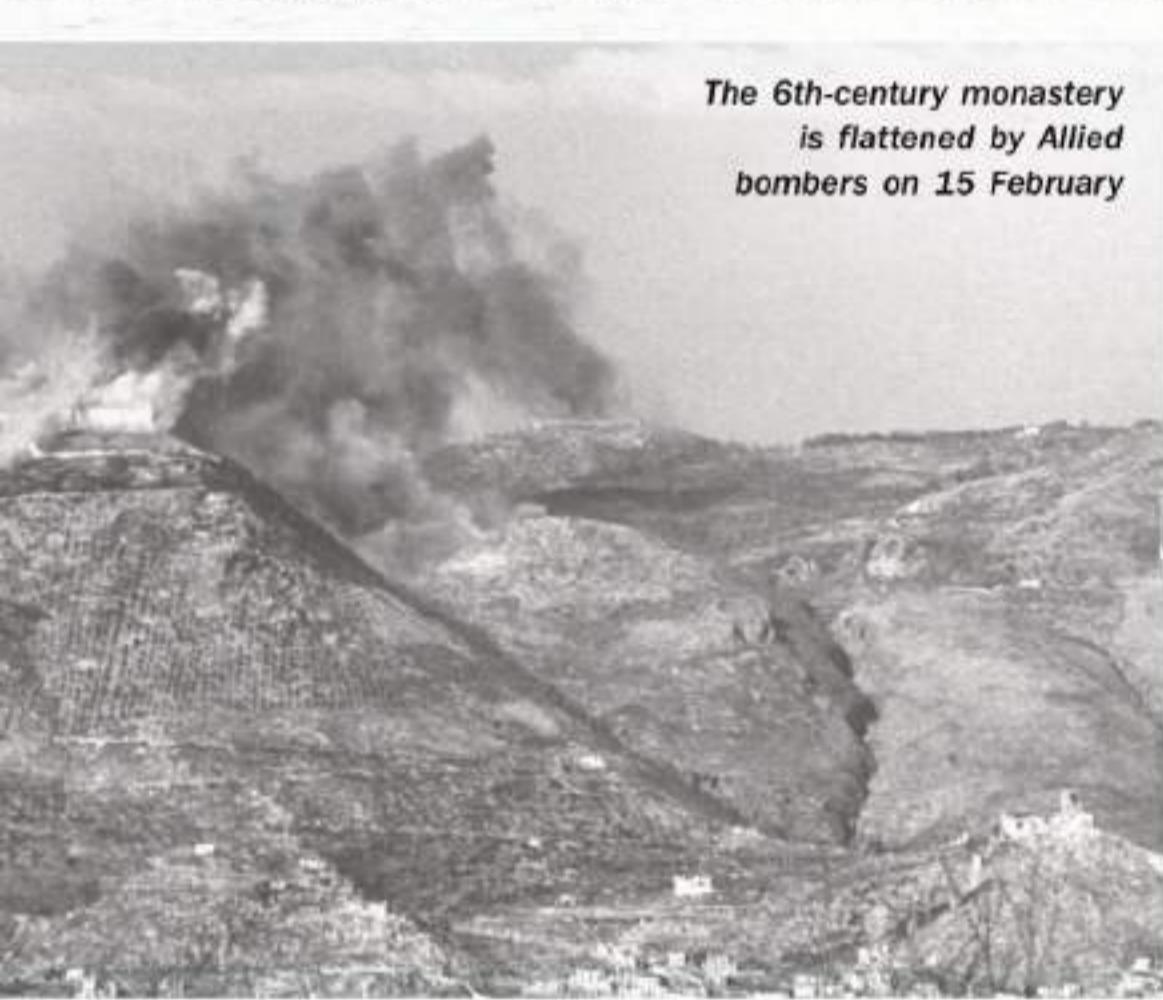
A Sherman tank moves through the ruins of the town after the battle



"OPERATION DIADEM PROMISED TO FINALLY END THE STALEMATE. THIS WAS TO BE ON A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SCALE TO THE FIRST THREE BATTLES, WITH 108 BATTALIONS AND 2,000 TANKS"



The 6th-century monastery is flattened by Allied bombers on 15 February



An American anti-tank gun, pictured during the fighting around Cassino

THE BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

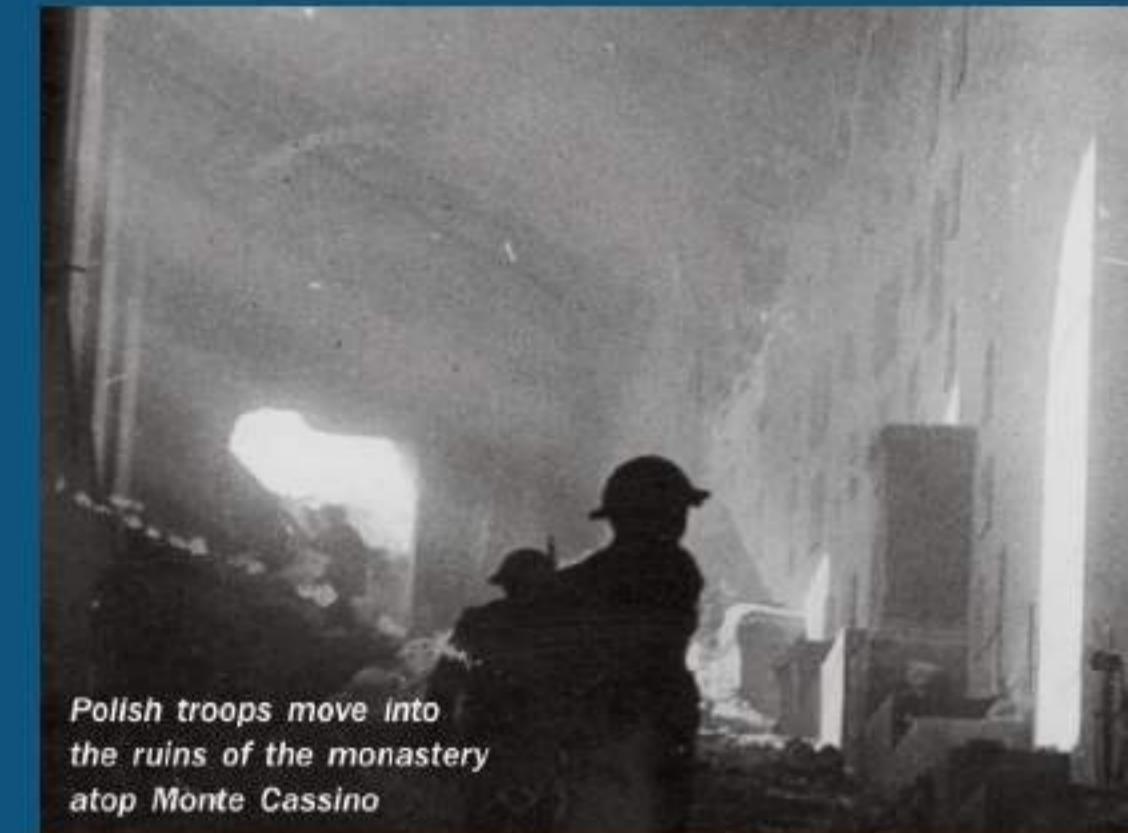
Lost in translation

A misunderstood radio intercept may have sealed the fate of Cassino's ancient monastery

The destruction of the monastery at Monte Cassino was widely condemned at the time, and new evidence suggests it may have been the product of a simple misunderstanding. There was no appetite for destroying such an important building, but under the pressure and harsh realities of war, where men's lives had to be balanced against the value of a building, difficult decisions were made.

There was suspicion that even if the Germans did not have fighting units in the building, they at least had artillery spotters. The commanding elevation of the monastery made it a prime location for spotters, and German artillery fire was extremely accurate.

General Bernard Freyberg worked hard to convince General Mark Clark to bomb the ancient building, and he was clearly persuasive, but a badly translated intercept may have factored in to the final decision. A German paratroop officer was



Polish troops move into the ruins of the monastery atop Monte Cassino

heard to ask: "Ist Abt in Kloster?" This was taken to mean, "Is the battalion in the abbey?", with 'Abt' being interpreted as an abbreviation for 'Abteilung'. Instead, the officer had been inquiring on the whereabouts of the Abbot. It is possible this provided enough of a pretext to justify the bombing of the monastery, but there is debate over how such flimsy evidence could have turned the tide of the argument.

Clark himself believed the decision was wrong and freely criticised it after the war, calling it a "tactical military mistake of the first magnitude" while conveniently forgetting that the final decision had been his.

the Allied forces ranged against the Germans were not already cosmopolitan enough, a corps of Polish troops arrived and was given the task of taking the monastery, the symbol of the entire struggle.

At 11 p.m. on the night of 11 May, 1,600 artillery pieces opened fire for 40 minutes before the massive assault began. Men of the 8th Indian Division found their crossing of the Rapido River to be a deadly undertaking. The canvas boats employed had been stored for extended periods and had been weakened by insect infestation. Many men drowned as their riddled boats sank during the crossing.

The weight of the attack, however, was irresistible. By 16 May, British tanks had found their way to the Via Casilina beyond Cassino and the German position was no longer tenable. German troops began to pull out under cover of darkness that night, and on 18 May, II Polish Corps took possession of the devastated monastery on top of Monte Cassino. The four battles had exacted a terrible price on the Allies. Not only had they been held up in their advance on Rome, they had taken around 50,000 casualties. German losses were less than half that, and they had managed to once more withdraw in good order.

On 25 May, US VI Corps finally broke out from its Anzio beachhead and linked up with Clark's Fifth Army. Faced with the choice of bottling up the retreating Germans or grabbing headlines by liberating the Eternal City, Clark chose glory and rushed into Rome.

The Germans were able to fall back to yet more defensive positions in the Gothic Line. They would not finally surrender until 2 May 1945.



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One of the most ambitious invasions in history would see the Atlantic Wall breached and the tide begin to turn against Germany

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With Hitler dead and their homelands in ruins, the battered survivors of the Wehrmacht faced an uncertain future in the hands of their vanquishers. Thousands would not survive their time in captivity

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"IF THE WAR IS LOST, THE NATION WILL PERISH. THIS FATE IS INEVITABLE... THOSE WHO REMAIN AFTER THE BATTLE ARE ONLY THE INFERIOR ONES, FOR THE GOOD ONES HAVE BEEN KILLED" – ADOLF HITLER, MARCH 1945

FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN



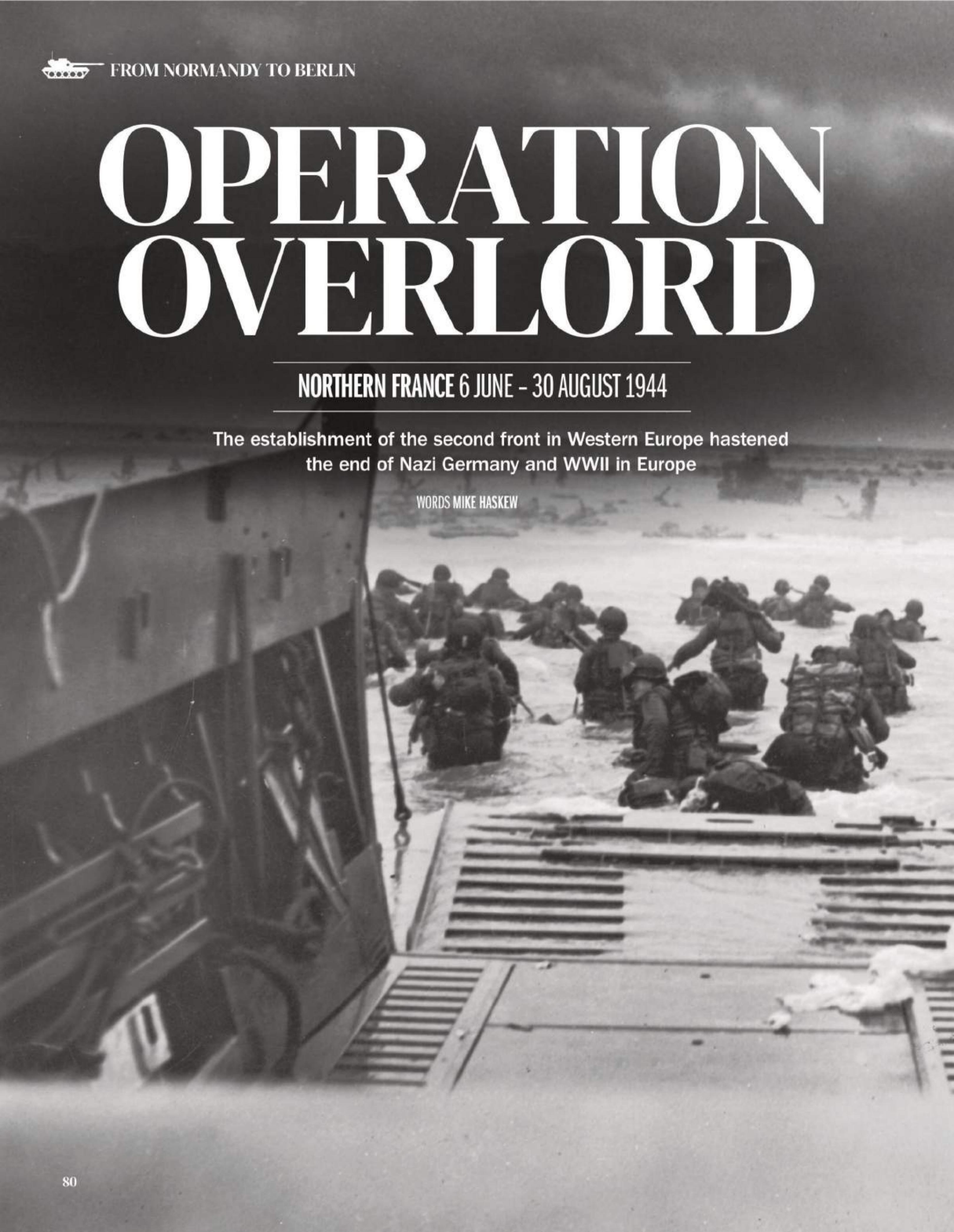


OPERATION OVERLORD

NORTHERN FRANCE 6 JUNE - 30 AUGUST 1944

The establishment of the second front in Western Europe hastened
the end of Nazi Germany and WWII in Europe

WORDS MIKE HASKEW



Adolf Hitler boasted that the Atlantic Wall, a string of fortifications stretching from the North Sea to the French frontier with Spain, was impregnable. Nevertheless, Allied commanders knew that the establishment of a second front in Western Europe was a prerequisite to the final defeat of Nazi Germany in WWII.

Since the summer of 1941, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had clamoured for a second front. His Red Army had borne the brunt of the ground war against the Germans. However, the United States and Britain were not militarily prepared to launch such an endeavour until mid-1944. Dubbed Operation Overlord, the long-awaited invasion occurred on D-Day, 6 June, along a 50-mile stretch of coastline in Normandy.

When finally unleashed after a weather delay, Operation Overlord involved more than 150,000 troops, nearly 7,000 ships and 4,100 aircraft. In the early morning, Allied soldiers stormed ashore on five invasion beaches. From east to west, the British Third Division assaulted Sword Beach, the 50th Division Gold Beach, the Canadian Third Division Juno Beach, and elements of the American First and 29th Divisions Omaha and the Fourth Division Utah beaches respectively.

American General Dwight D. Eisenhower led the senior Allied command structure, while his immediate subordinates were British. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder was deputy supreme commander; Admiral Bertram Ramsay led the seaborne effort; Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory the air; and General Bernard Law

Montgomery the ground forces. American General Omar N. Bradley commanded the US First Army under Montgomery, and General Miles Dempsey led the British Second Army.

The Allies knew that Operation Overlord was fraught with risk. The assault troops had to force a lodgment on the Norman coast and not only defend against certain German counterattacks from elements of Army Group B under the resourceful Field Marshal Erwin Rommel but also somehow rapidly expand the beachhead inland. The naval forces would be subject to attack from enemy submarines and air assets in the relative confinement of the English Channel.

Still, the riskiest proposition of Overlord was the predawn insertion of three airborne divisions, parachuting or gliding into the countryside to secure



Boys of Pointe du Hoc

US Army Rangers scaled cliffs on D-Day to attack German gun emplacements that threatened the invasion beaches

Among the daring exploits of D-Day, a detachment of 225 US Army Rangers of the Second Battalion scaled the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc, west of Omaha Beach. Their objective was a German battery believed to house six 155mm howitzers capable of delivering devastating fire against either Omaha or Utah beach.

Led by Lieutenant Colonel James Rudder, the Rangers were to silence the guns after climbing the promontory while under enemy fire. On paper, it looked like a suicide run, but the Rangers were equal to the task.

They planned to use grappling hooks on ropes fired towards the summit and then work

their way hand over hand to the top. They also borrowed ladders from the London Fire Brigade for the task.

Once in position, the Rangers found that most of their ropes were soaked. With the added weight the catapults failed to reach the desired height. Undeterred, the Rangers won the crest and drove the Germans off only to discover that the guns had been removed.

Five of them were later located in an apple orchard and destroyed with thermite grenades. The Rangers stood their ground, fighting off several counterattacks until relieved on 8 June. Of those engaged, only 90 remained unscathed.



After the capture of Pointe du Hoc, German prisoners march into captivity near the command post of Lieutenant Colonel James Rudder



American soldiers crouch behind the gunwales of a landing craft as they approach Omaha Beach on D-Day

the flanks of the landings, holding vital bridges and causeway exits, disrupting communications, and standing fast until relieved with a linkup of advancing troops off the beaches.

The American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions came down widely dispersed in the west, while the British Sixth Airborne's glider landings occurred on the eastern flank. Casualties were expected to run high, but Eisenhower deemed the operation worthwhile. In the end, the airborne forces performed with great distinction.

At about 11.30 p.m. on 5 June, the invasion armada set sail for Normandy. Soon after, transport aircraft took to the sky carrying the airborne contingent. It was hoped that naval bombardment and frequent air raids against German defensive positions and infrastructure had paved the way for a successful landing and a push inland that would secure vital objectives and close gaps between the beaches swiftly.

At first light, Allied troops stormed ashore in Normandy. On Sword Beach, the British fought their way inland to capture the German defensive position at La Breche and reached the outskirts of Ouistreham. At Gold, the British seized Port-en-Bessin, just under four miles inland. Heavy seas hampered the landing of reinforcements and the movement of supporting tanks, and though their beachhead was secure, the British failed to take the transport and communications centre of Caen, a primary D-Day objective.

At Juno, the Canadians faced intense opposition and fought for two hours to dislodge defenders along the shoreline. Eventually, the Canadians linked up with the British from Gold Beach, but a gap still remained between Gold and Sword. The Allies were actually aided by the ineptitude of the German response. The bulk of their armoured divisions were held in reserve to be released only on Hitler's personal order. Therefore, the German 21st Panzer Division mounted the only substantial counterattack of the day, driving between Sword and Gold beaches all the way to the coast. However, there were no reinforcements to exploit the gain and the Germans were compelled to withdraw.

The American landings at Utah Beach went fortuitously awry. The Fourth Division actually came ashore in the wrong place, but assistant division commander General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., proclaimed, "We'll start the war from here!" Within just a few hours the Americans were plunging ahead against unexpectedly light resistance.

Though many of the German troops that garrisoned the Atlantic Wall defences were static units or conscripts from occupied countries, the 352nd Infantry Division was an experienced formation that took full advantage of the cliffs at Omaha Beach and made the broad expanse of the shoreline at low tide a killing ground.

Omaha was the most horrific battle of D-Day. Many US soldiers of the first wave were shot as

soon as the ramps of their landing craft were lowered. Others were weighed down by combat packs and drowned. Rough seas swamped amphibious tanks meant to add firepower to the assault. The situation was so perilous by mid-morning that General Bradley contemplated withdrawing the troops from the beach and diverting reinforcements to quieter sectors.

Ultimately, the resilience of the GIs prevailed as junior and noncommissioned officers got up from the makeshift shelter of beach obstacles to take on German strongpoints one by one. By the afternoon the situation at Omaha stabilised. But the beachhead was precarious and a nine-mile gap existed between the Americans at Omaha and the Canadians at Juno. The distance was even greater to a linkup with the Fourth Division at Utah.

Despite the difficulties encountered on D-Day at the cost of 2,500 dead and another 7,500 wounded, the Allied forces solidified their foothold in Normandy. Looking beyond the beaches, though, weeks of tough fighting lay ahead. Operation Overlord, the Normandy campaign, proceeded – painfully at times.

Montgomery hammered away at Caen, but the Germans held the city and the dominating high ground of Hill 112 for more than a month. Still, the British commander contended that his design was to draw the bulk of the German armoured divisions, finally released by Hitler, upon himself to enable the Americans on his right flank to advance.

The Americans were challenged by the terrain as centuries-old hedgerows made a patchwork of the Norman countryside, turning meadows into free-fire zones and country lanes into deathtraps. Progress was slow as some formations turned toward the Cotentin Peninsula and the deepwater port of Cherbourg while others maintained the advance against the town of Saint Lo and other objectives that would unhinge the German resistance.

While the British finally secured Caen in mid-July, the Americans launched an all-out effort to break free of the hedgerows. Bradley's plan, called Operation Cobra, involved the saturation bombing of German positions along the front lines followed by a swift assault of American armour and infantry that would lead the spearheads into open country.

On 25 July, Cobra was unleashed. The defending Germans were stunned, and one division – the Panzer Lehr – ceased to function due to the ferocity of the bombing. During the next 48 hours, American forces advanced 17 miles. Simultaneously, renewed British efforts combined to unhinge the German defences in Normandy. A foolhardy counterattack ordered by Hitler served only to further weaken the German forces, depleting their armoured contingent significantly.

With the enemy in full retreat a golden opportunity to bag the entire German Seventh Army and other formations presented itself. A giant Allied pincer movement converged on the area of Falaise. By mid-August Allied forces had thrown a bridgehead across the River Seine while Montgomery fixed the bulk of the German armour to the north and the Canadian First Army swung toward the enemy's right flank. Meanwhile, the newly activated Third Army under fiery General George S. Patton, Jr., dashed across France, threatening to outflank the Germans in the south.

Although fanatical German resistance held the shoulders of the 'Falaise Pocket' open and allowed about 40,000 enemy soldiers to escape, Allied air and artillery fire turned the area into a meatgrinder. More than 10,000 Germans were killed and 50,000 fell into captivity. Eisenhower visited the



American troops accompany M4 Sherman medium tanks through the ravaged French village of Coutances during Operation Cobra

battleground and remarked that he could not step in any direction without touching the body of a dead enemy soldier.

By late August the Allies had destroyed organised German resistance in Normandy, vaulted the Seine, secured the Cotentin Peninsula and raced across Brittany deep into the interior of France. On 25 August, Paris, the City of Light, was liberated after four arduous years of German occupation. Operation Overlord and the Normandy campaign were over.

The Allies had sustained over 200,000 casualties, more than 125,000 of them American, while the Germans lost well over 200,000 soldiers who were either killed, wounded or captured.

More grievous losses were sustained during months of fighting, but in April 1945 American soldiers linked up with the Soviet Red Army, which had been advancing west since 1943, at the German town of Torgau on the Elbe River. Within days the Third Reich would end and Hitler's dreams of a thousand-year empire would lay in ruins.

A communiqué never sent

Although he had faith in the success of Operation Overlord, General Dwight Eisenhower was required to prepare for the worst

The weather was horrific, but thousands of soldiers were poised to assault Hitler's Fortress Europe. While rain pelted and wind howled, General Dwight D. Eisenhower assembled senior commanders at Southwick House in Portsmouth, England, early on 5 June 1944 to seek advice. Weather forecasts indicated a window for the D-Day operation, already postponed by 24 hours, to launch the next day. Security concerns were rising. Such an immense operation could not remain secret indefinitely. The troops were ready. Another postponement would sap combat efficiency. The next favourable conditions were two weeks away. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery piped, "I would say go!"

Others nodded, and Eisenhower pronounced, "OK, we'll go!"

Failure was unthinkable, but Eisenhower prepared a statement shouldering command responsibility: "Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone." Ultimately, the decision to order Overlord was Eisenhower's. The message stayed in his pocket and was given to a staff officer as a souvenir.



General Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme Allied commander (front, centre), poses with senior Allied officers during the planning of Operation Overlord



WESTERN TASK FORCE

EASTERN TASK FORCE

BRITISH 2ND ARMY

DEMPSEY



XXX
CORPS
BUCKNALL

50TH
INFANTRY
DIVISION



ICORPS
CROCKER

3RD CDN. INFANTRY DIVISION

**3RD
INFANTRY
DIVISION**

GOLD

JUNO

SWORD

BAYEUX

**716TH
INFANTRY
DIVISION**

CAEN

XLVII Pz CORPS

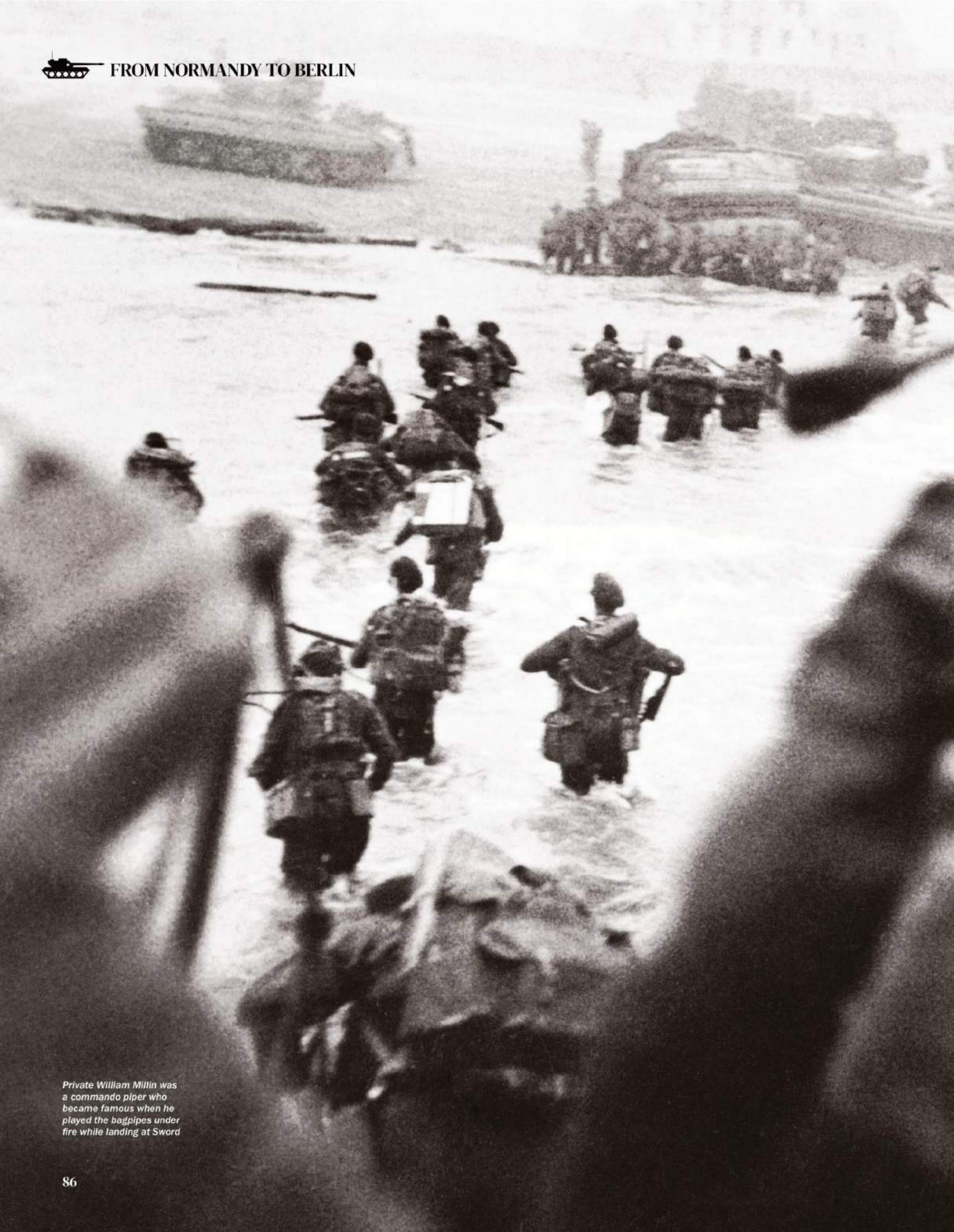
711TH INFANTRY DIVISION

Dives

Map: Bottleneck Design



FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN



Private William Millin was a commando piper who became famous when he played the bagpipes under fire while landing at Sword

MEN OF GOLD AND SWORD

WORDS TOM GARNER

Two British D-Day veterans recall their moving experiences of landing in Normandy

D-Day was the culmination of years of planning and the Allied aim was nothing less than the liberation of occupied France, the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of WWII.

Of the 13 participating Allied nations, the landings were led by the US, Canada and Britain. The latter played a key role, and the invasion itself was launched from the south coast of England. All three of the Allied commanders responsible for land, sea and air forces were British and so comprised nearly half the troops. British forces were designated to land en masse at two of the five Allied invasion beaches: Gold and Sword. The

fighting at these beaches and in the Normandy countryside was extremely hard and by the time the campaign ended in August 1944, 22,442 British servicemen had died. Nevertheless, their sacrifice was not in vain, and the liberation of occupied Western Europe was completed in less than a year.

75 years later, two veterans from Gold and Sword, George Batts and Cedric Wasser, describe their roles during this pivotal moment of history. Both were extremely young men in 1944 but they helped to free France and are still determined to ensure that the sacrifices of their comrades are never forgotten.



The Sapper



**George Batts
MBE landed
at Gold Beach
to ensure
the safety of
Allied troops
by clearing
German mines**

Gold was the central-most Allied beach. After the beachhead was secured, the British aim was to link up with the Americans at Omaha and the Canadians at Juno while also capturing Bayeux. Soldiers began landing at 7.25 a.m., but high winds made disembarkation difficult. The British also came under attack from German embrasure,

emplacement and artillery fire, which resulted in over 1,000 casualties. Bayeux was not captured until the following day, but Arromanches-les-Bains was taken and the British soon made contact with the Canadians.

Among the thousands of British troops who landed was Sapper George Batts of 1049 Port Operating Company, Royal Engineers. Batts was only 18 years old but he cleared mines in the vicinity of Gold for several days before working extensively on the beach's Mulberry harbour. After Normandy, Batts served in Belgium and the Far East, where he helped to liberate Allied prisoners from Japanese POW camps.

In later years Batts was heavily involved in the Normandy Veterans Association (NVA) and became its national secretary and treasurer. When the NVA disbanded in 2014 he was instrumental in founding the Normandy Memorial Trust (NMT) and secured government funding from the then Prime Minister David Cameron for an official memorial to the British of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy. Now the recipient of an MBE and Légion d'honneur, Batts is the patron of the NMT along with Prince

Charles. He describes wading ashore under fire, prodding mines with bayonets and his pride for the memorial he has achieved for his fallen comrades.

Going into the unknown

When did you join the British Army and how were you selected for the Royal Engineers?

I volunteered on 18 March 1943. In those days all we youngsters wanted to do was to join up and be heroes. I wanted to get in the RAF but I'm colour-blind so I joined the army. I was interviewed by a colonel at an RE depot in Brighton where I said I wanted to be a Royal Engineer. This was because you became tradesmen in the RE and got a bit more money.

What did your training involve?

I volunteered for a special section without knowing what it was. It was actually an advanced commando course and I became an explosives expert. This was for all explosives and booby traps, including German, Italian and British mines. I hadn't left school long so I loved it. You were trained to defuse explosives, lay them and blow things up.

Royal Engineers clear mines from the main street of Tilly-sur-Seulles, 19 June 1944



*British troops advance into Normandy, 6 June 1944.
For all Allied troops, getting off the beaches as quickly as possible was a priority*



When did you find out about the invasion?

Virtually the day before. Everybody was mobilising so we knew we were going somewhere and guessed it would be France but we weren't sure until Monty came round and spoke to us. He told us we were going on the biggest adventure of our life.

How did it feel to be part of Operation Overlord?

As an 18 year old, you have mixed feelings. You're scared because you know the war had been going on for years and so you'd consequently think, 'I could be killed.' It's the first realisation you have of that. Apart from that, you're doing training and when you're 18 and pretty fit you enjoy it. However, all of a sudden you know you're going somewhere where people are going to fire at you and it will be real ammunition instead of blanks.

Were you briefed before you crossed the English Channel?

No, not really. Funnily enough, it was all supposed to be top secret and we went to Newhaven in lorries but there were people cheering as we went through. They knew more than we did! To be fair,

they could see all these troops and you've got to be an idiot not to realise something's going on when you see people getting on ships.

What was your crossing like on an LSI (Landing Ship, Infantry)?

We were on the ship for a while because D-Day was cancelled for 24 hours. It was rocking about a bit but the crossing wasn't too bad. I didn't get seasick but it was frightening because you were going into the unknown.

There was mostly bomber aircraft going over but there were still some paratroopers as well. That was one hell of a sight to see the gliders and planes. There were also silly jokes, giggles and leg-pulls onboard and at the time you laughed your head off. It was a real 'nervous-twitch' type of thing.

Disembarkation**What happened during your arrival off the Normandy coast?**

We got off the coast and the navy opened up. I'll never forget the noise and naval shells were going

over the top of our heads. We had a nervous inter-services joke, which was, 'For Christ's sake, make sure they know what they're aiming at!'

We then went down the scrambling ropes into the assault craft and they were bobbing up and down about 18–20 feet in the swell. Just before I got over onto the ropes, two blokes slipped. They went between the landing craft and the ship and were squashed.

What were your experiences of landing on Gold?

We got down in the assault craft and when it was full it took off, went round in a circle, lined up and then into the beaches. There was no going back and you had to wait for the ramp to go down. You couldn't see anything beyond that and when the ramp went down somebody shouted for us to get off. I was up to my waist in water. A lot of people dropped into holes created by shells and were drowned because we had a lot of equipment.

The priority was to get off the beach and there was fog from so much artillery, rifles, machine guns and mortars. I landed at about 10.30 a.m. and there had been plenty of time to make a mess





of the beach. It was pitted with holes and God knows what and there was also a mist that was like a miniature pea souper. The Germans were doing the dirty and it was just a case of getting off as quickly as possible. There was one pillbox that wasn't put out of action until the early afternoon and they killed a lot of people. I was one of the lucky ones.

Were you aware of the historical significance of what you were all doing?

Yes, but the main thing was that we were highly trained. When the ramp goes down, you hit the beach and people are firing, your training takes over. You lost all sense of thinking except for what you were trained to do.

For most of us it was the only invasion we did. You don't know what you're going to do and when you're there it's not really registering because of self-preservation. Being quite honest, unless you were involved in it, you can't believe it. Even when you are involved in it you sometimes get to a point afterwards where you don't believe it yourself. As you get older you think, 'Did it happen?'

Mines and Mulberry

Where were you clearing mines after you landed?

We were clearing off the beach, which was better than being on it because you didn't get sand in your eyes. In some cases we were part of the advance or behind in the vicinity of Gold. The detecting equipment was useless because there was too much ordnance around so we were prodding for mines with bayonets. It sounds incredible but we simply prodded and scraped.



However, we'd spent months in training so it was second nature. You would scrape around, get rid of the sand very carefully, feel for the wire and clip it. The Germans had two or three types of mines but you got to know them. I was just a school kid really and it was exciting.

We did this for about three days. Some areas had active mines while others had none because the Germans just wanted to scare you. However, you couldn't take anything for granted. You had to prod all over the land because a few were killed when mines were detonated.

After you cleared the mines, what were your tasks on Gold's Mulberry harbour?

I was working on the harbour as soon as it opened. We unloaded ships in 12-hour shifts and it was bloody hard work, but the harbour was an incredible thing. It's one of the most fantastic engineering feats and it all fitted together. However, at the time it was just a bloody nuisance because of the work!

We unloaded supplies and the thing that sticks in my mind were the Red Cross ships that took the injured back. After there had been some battles,

Batts worked on Gold's Mulberry harbour until September 1944. This temporary harbour facilitated the rapid offloading of cargo onto the beaches during the Normandy landings



such as Caen; the queues of ambulances coming up to the harbour were things I'll never forget. You used to see the wounded taken onto the ships and it was shocking. German POWs also departed from the harbour and that hurt because they were going to England while we were still stuck out there.

What dangers were you subjected to in Normandy in the subsequent months?

The Germans tried to bomb Mulberry every night so the artillery would put up a bomb barrage. The anti-aircraft stuff went up but it had to come down and shrapnel would ping on the metal harbour.

How people were not hit I do not know. We would camp in an orchard and you could hear the shrapnel hitting the trees as it came down. Strangely enough, nobody was ever hit.

I also did a few guard duties at Arromanches and it was the most frightening thing. There were still a lot of German snipers around and the slightest noise made you aware. Because the lads were still fighting there was many a poor cow that got shot.

However, I was lucky being in the RE because I was on the Mulberry harbour for months and the fighting gradually moved away.

What was your opinion of the Germans?

In general I think they were the same as us. The majority didn't want to fight any more than we did, but you had the fanatics including the elite regiments and the Hitler Youth. The latter were absolute b*****ds but most were around 16, and who wants to kill a 16 year old?

Did you encounter other Allied troops?

We used to see the Americans. They had great big automatic lorries and they'd be sitting there with the peaks turned up on their caps, usually a cigar stuck in their mouth and driving like maniacs. We did as we were told most of the time but they were gung-ho and always looked as if they were really enjoying themselves.

How did the French receive the British?

Most of them welcomed us, but some hated us. Some of the French girls had had German boyfriends and if there was nobody else around then it was understandable. But one thing I'll never forget is when we moved towards Belgium.

There were some French Resistance who got hold of some of the girls who had been 'collaborating' and they cut their hair off. We were going to stop them but some other Frenchmen said, "No, no. They kill." The Resistance would have killed us and we had to keep out of the way. It was heartbreaking.

"Don't allow another war"

What made you decide to become involved with the NVA in later years?

When I came out of the army I wasn't interested in joining anything. However, a great mate of mine called Len who I served with was ill and I visited him in hospital. He said, "Are you in the RE Association?" and I said that I wouldn't join a bloody thing. He said, "Well you're an idiot" and died a week later. My wife had also died and I wanted something to do. I thought of Len and joined the local branches of the RE Association and NVA. This was in 1996, and I eventually became the treasurer and secretary of the National NVA.

I'm so glad I joined and without it I don't think I'd be alive. It kept me going because there was so much to do and places to go. For the 70th anniversary I was working about ten hours a day because as the secretary you're the focal point for all enquiries. The phone calls, emails and letters never stopped.

How does it feel now that the British will finally have an official memorial in Normandy?

Absolutely incredible. A lot of people are saying that it should have been done years before. I was an ordinary little sapper but I got it going and got millions of pounds from the government.

Generals, field marshals and big noises were all saying it should have been done, and they were in a much better position than me to do it. However, I got it done because I had a bit of cheek with the prime minister.

For me, it's obviously a dream come true and to think that its little me that got it, I'm very proud, particularly because nobody else had done it.

How important is it that D-Day and the Battle of Normandy are remembered?

It's absolutely essential. I used to go to a lot of schools and the one thing I used to ram into the kids is that war is not funny and don't allow another war.

That's still my feeling because what did the war prove? It got rid of the Germans but millions were killed. Is it worth millions of lives and disruption to topple a few people? There must be some other way and I don't want anybody to go through what we went through.



Commandos of 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division come ashore at Gold near La Rivière-Saint-Sauveur

Batts was awarded an MBE in 2015 for his services to veterans and is the patron of the Normandy Memorial Trust along with the Prince of Wales





Commemorating British veterans

The Royal British Legion and Normandy Memorial Trust are holding special events to honour the United Kingdom's contribution to D-Day

For the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings, the Royal British Legion and Normandy Memorial Trust ensured that the veterans and fallen of the Normandy Campaign suitably honoured.

As Britain's leading armed forces charity, the British Legion took around 300 D-Day veterans on a specially chartered ship to mark the anniversary of 6 June 1944. The voyage took veterans to a series of commemorative events in the UK and France at

no cost to themselves. Between 2–8 June 2019, veterans sailed on MV Boudicca to France via Dover, Poole and Portsmouth before arriving at Le Havre for events in Normandy between 6–7 June. There was also a D-Day 75 Commemoration Event at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire on 6 June for veterans unable to travel on the ship.

There was also a special inauguration of a new British Normandy Memorial at Ver-sur-Mer, courtesy of the Normandy Memorial Trust. At the instigation of veteran George Batts MBE, the NMT secured a government commitment to construct a powerful and inspiring statement to honour the British servicemen who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Battle of Normandy.

Designed by architect Liam O'Connor, the memorial was unveiled on 6 June 2021.

"AT THE INSTIGATION OF VETERAN GEORGE BATTS MBE, THE NMT SECURED A GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT TO CONSTRUCT A POWERFUL AND INSPIRING STATEMENT TO HONOUR THE BRITISH SERVICEMEN WHO MADE THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE"



An artist's impression of the British Normandy Memorial from the southeast. The memorial overlooks Gold Beach



An artist's impression of the commissioned British Normandy Memorial at Ver-sur-Mer





The Craftsman

Cedric Wasser landed at Sword Beach to repair the vehicles that pushed the invasion forward

Sword was the easternmost beach on D-Day and stretched from Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer to Ouistreham. It was also the nearest beach to Caen, and the responsibility for storming the sands fell to the British 3rd Infantry Division.

The invading forces landed at 7.25 a.m. on 6 June against relatively light German defences and by 8.00 a.m. the fighting was mostly occurring inland. At 1.00 p.m., commandos from Sword achieved their objective of linking up with airborne troops, but the British were unable to join Canadian forces from Juno Beach thanks to German counterattacks.

20-year-old Cedric Wasser was one of those who landed at Sword. A craftsman in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), Wasser's unit was attached to 7th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery. Like Batts, D-Day was Wasser's first experience of combat, and after being driven off the beach he was tasked with repairing the light vehicles that enabled the Allied advance.

Despite operating behind the front line, Wasser conducted his repair work under the constant threat of artillery fire for weeks. Now a recipient of the Légion d'honneur, he recalls watching a German pillbox explode, avoiding shellfire and taking risks to check on his friends.

Joining the REME

When did you join the British Army?

I enlisted on my birthday, which was 10 February 1942, and went into service on 12 March. I volunteered because there was a scheme where volunteers could choose which branch of the army they wanted to serve in. I had the option of the Royal Engineers, Royal Army Ordnance Corps or the Royal Artillery. With the Engineers I could only think of mines and barbed wire, which didn't appeal to me. I wanted to go into the RAOC but the interviewing officer said, "I'm sorry, but you

haven't got the right qualifications," so that left me with the artillery.

I joined that and started as a driver mechanic. I was interviewed again and put into a course with the Royal Corps of Signals before I was reassigned to the REME. I did courses in Leicester and Birmingham before I was sent to Croydon, where I passed the exams. We were then allocated for postings and the chap with the lists said, "We're going to post you as near to your home as possible." However, they posted me to Dumfries! I've never forgiven him for that, but it was all good experience in the end.

What training did you do for amphibious landings?

We spent two or three months near Dumfries, where I was allocated to the 3rd Infantry Division and attached to the 7th Field Artillery. We were moved further north to Fort George, where we learned to waterproof vehicles and do whatever was necessary to get the vehicles in decent shape for the invasion.

In about May 1944 we were sent down all the way from Scotland to near Brighton in a long convoy. There was a wooded area on the London-Brighton road and we were camped there doing final preparations. On 1 June we were motored down to Gosport to board LST (Landing Ship, Tank) 302. We were sitting around for a few days and on 5 June the invasion was postponed for 24 hours because of the weather conditions.

Landing on Sword

What did you know about the invasion of France?

I don't think we were told anything until we got down into the south of England, but the fact that we were waterproofing vehicles was a sign that an invasion was going to take place. It was one



British troops prepare to move into the Normandy countryside. Wasser would repair light vehicles such as the pictured motorcycle.



"I DON'T THINK WE WERE TOLD ANYTHING UNTIL WE GOT DOWN INTO THE SOUTH OF ENGLAND, BUT THE FACT THAT WE WERE WATERPROOFING VEHICLES WAS A SIGN THAT AN INVASION WAS GOING TO TAKE PLACE"

Commandos attached to 3rd Infantry Division move inland from Sword Beach after landing near Ouistreham. A bridge-laying tank can be seen in the background





big question mark really, particularly with not knowing exactly how we were going to land and what opposition there was going to be. I was in the second wave to land on Sword Beach so thankfully I wasn't involved in the initial assault.

What was the crossing like across the English Channel?

We had hammocks to sleep in because we were onboard three or four days prior to the invasion. There was also an area in the channel called 'Piccadilly Circus' where all the convoys of ships assembled. The crossing itself was a bit choppy and seasickness pills were distributed. They were very useful!

What happened when LST 302 approached Sword Beach?

We were due to land at about 10 a.m. but a lone German plane came across and dropped a bomb. Fortunately it missed our ship but the vibration of the explosion put the lift mechanism on the LST out of action. On the upper deck there were Jeeps and heavy vehicles while on the lower deck there were Sherman tanks etc.

The tanks got off alright but we couldn't get our vehicles down because of the broken lift. We had

"WE KNEW WHAT WAS GOING ON BUT OUR THOUGHTS WERE VERY 'LOCAL' IN THE SENSE THAT WE WERE ALL LOOKING OUT FOR NUMBER ONE AND TRYING TO SURVIVE"

to wait for an hour or so before another LST came alongside and the ship's crews put wooden planks between the vessels. We had to drive our vehicles across these planks onto that ship and we hadn't even landed! We then went down on their lift and discharged onto a 'Rhino', which was a huge floating platform made of steel cubes that were welded together. The Rhinos had motors and they took us to the beach from just offshore.

What could you see on the beach as you were waiting to land?

The battle was raging a bit inland by that time, although I saw a German pillbox blow up. There was a machine gun in it and it was causing trouble across the beach. I was watching high up from the top of this LST and it was like a grandstand view. After a few minutes a naval shell was directed towards this pillbox and it was blown into pieces. It went up with some force because a naval shell can do a lot of damage.

What happened when you finally landed on Sword?

We got onto this Rhino and I was in a 1,500-weight vehicle that drove onto the beach. We were then driven through the town of Lion-sur-Mer, which was the nearest settlement to where we landed. We were pretty much taken off Sword Beach and my feet never touched the sand because I was in the vehicle. Any congestion that had been caused by the first wave had seemingly been cleared, so it was relatively easy to get off. There was no more congestion and it was relatively efficient.

Were you aware of the importance of D-Day at the time?

Yes, but I don't think we gave much thought as to what was happening elsewhere. We knew what was going on but our thoughts were very 'local' in the sense that we were all looking out for number one and trying to survive.

Soldiers of the Suffolk Regiment come under heavy fire while waiting to move off the 'Queen' section of Sword on the morning of 6 June



Repairing under fire

Where were you based in Normandy after the landing?

We were escorted off Sword Beach and went to Hermanville-sur-Mer, where I spent a night under the stars. There were German planes about even then, because they would drop anti-personnel bombs among us. We survived that and then on 7 June we were directed to a village called Périers-sur-le-Dan. We had to dig trenches at the church and cemetery and managed to fit bits of timber to cover the top. We were there for five weeks and during this time there were exchanges between the German and British artillery. The shells would whizz over the top of us, with some of them landing in the field just beyond. One of the shells landed closer than that and killed one of my friends. We were there until there was the big bomber raid on Caen. It was August by then but it was liberated and troops were able to go in.

What was your specific task during the campaign?

I repaired vehicles. Information would come through to the command post and there were about 12–13 of us in the Light Aid Detachment. If repairs were required, I would be detailed to

go and fix vehicles like trucks and motorbikes, although I didn't have much to do with tanks. This was because the tanks were very complicated things and if anything went wrong they would need to be repaired in a workshop. On the other hand, a motorbike is relatively easy to repair.

What were working conditions like?

During those five weeks in Normandy I was transferred to the 20th Anti-Tank Regiment. I was very sad because I'd got all my colleagues who I'd trained and landed with. However, I was able to borrow an NCO's motorbike and used it to visit my friends who were not too far away. I was fortunate that I wasn't shot up! I was at risk but it didn't occur to me because I was desperate to check up on my pals. There was a great sense of camaraderie among us.

Overall, our experiences were very localised and we were not aware of what was going on at Sword once we were inland. The officer in charge would give us a pep talk each day. He would get maps out to put us in the picture as to what was going to – hopefully – happen, but I don't remember being told about the Mulberry harbours or the undersea pipeline called 'Pluto'. We just wanted to keep safe and avoid any trouble if possible.

However, with the shells going across we were always in danger of being hit by them dropping short of their target, which was a bit worrying. There was always a possibility of German shells landing among us in all the time I was in France and the Low Countries.

For example, there was one occasion when our breakdown vehicle had a direct hit in the churchyard and it was put out of action. When we moved out of the cemetery we went to an area near Troarn where we had a replacement vehicle. We had to dig a huge hole in the ground to half-bury it so it was protected from artillery fire.

What happened when you left Normandy?

We eventually moved out of the area up towards Belgium before we moved into Holland. Operation Market Garden was taking place, although we were not directly involved. However, we were able to witness some of the battles at Nijmegen Bridge. Thankfully that operation ended and we were able to go into Germany.

I ended up in a little town called Buren. The battles were still going on further into Germany but our detachment was sent back to Belgium. While we were in Buren I wanted some exposed camera film developed in the local chemists. For safety's sake I





FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN

used the name 'Waters' instead of Wasser because my surname is German. My forebears came to Britain from Germany in the early 1800s, but I didn't want to open myself up to any retaliation from this chemist in case he thought I was a German!

It was on a Belgian airstrip that we heard that the cessation of hostilities had taken place. Everybody was relieved and we were looking forward to going home, so it was a bit of shock to be told that we had to go back to the continent after a week.

We were then flown to Cairo via Libya to pick up new vehicles and equipment and went on a long convoy through the Sinai Desert to Palestine. We were on the outskirts of Jerusalem before we moved down to the Suez Canal. There was an ex-RAF aerodrome there and it was actually quite pleasant. In December 1946 we went back to Dover, where I was demobbed. I was home on 12 December, which was just in time for Christmas. I was quite well travelled by then!

An important commemoration

How did it feel to be awarded the Légion d'honneur by the French Government in 2015?

It was very nice. We heard that this medal was being distributed and we were told how to get hold of a form. I filled it in and just waited. The next thing I knew I had a letter from the French consulate in Birmingham asking if I would attend Rugby Town Hall for a presentation, which turned out to be on my birthday.

I was allowed to bring a dozen friends with me and I was at a bit of a loss as to what to say apart from 'Thank you very much!' I hadn't prepared anything but I said a few words and thanked the mayor and councillors. It was a bit emotional and certainly a highlight of my year.



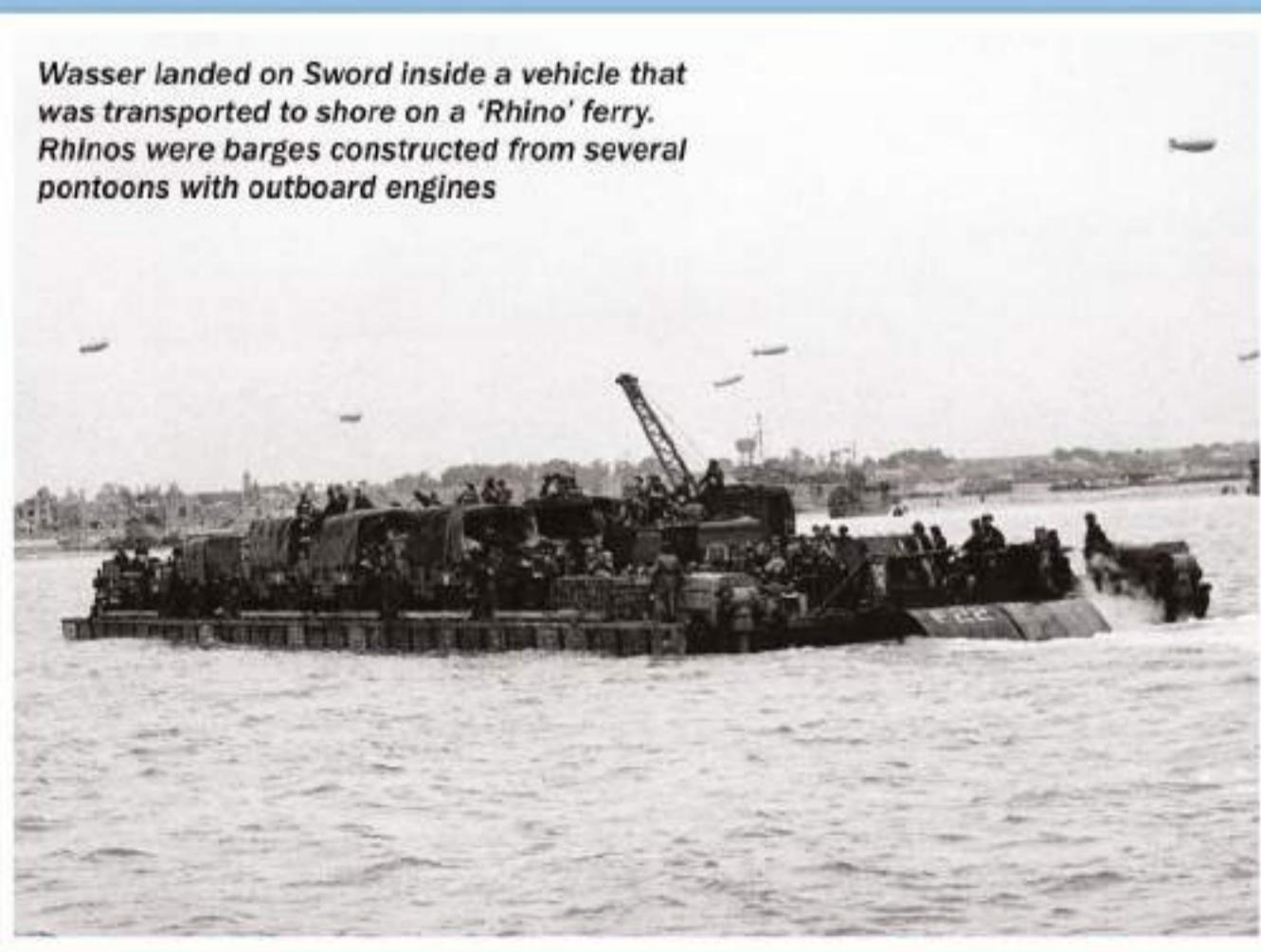
An American B-26 Marauder returns to its British base while flying over the landings at Sword, 6 June 1944

"I WANTED SOME CAMERA FILM DEVELOPED IN THE LOCAL CHEMISTS. I USED THE NAME 'WATERS'... I DIDN'T WANT ANY RETALIATION FROM THIS CHEMIST IN CASE HE THOUGHT I WAS GERMAN!"

How important is it that the events of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy are remembered after 75 years?

There certainly won't be any veterans left for the 100th anniversary and so I think this particular commemoration is very important. A lot hung on the invasion and if it had failed we might not be sitting here now talking. It was highly important and significant and so I think it is right and proper that it is being recognised and commemorated.

Wasser landed on Sword inside a vehicle that was transported to shore on a 'Rhino' ferry. Rhinos were barges constructed from several pontoons with outboard engines



Cedric Wasser pictured overlooking Omaha Beach, 23 April 2017



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FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN

OPERATION MARKET GARDEN

THE NETHERLANDS 17-25 SEPTEMBER 1944

For over 77 years the underlying reasons for the failure at Arnhem have gone largely unremarked upon, despite being in plain sight

WORDS WILLIAM F BUCKINGHAM



The Battle of Normandy effectively ended on 21 August 1944 with the closing of the Falaise Gap, 76 days after Allied troops first set foot on the D-Day landing beaches. The battle cost the Germans around 10,000 dead and 50,000 prisoners along with almost all their heavy equipment and vehicles, and an estimated tide of 20,000 survivors fled eastward as far as southern Holland, where the local civilians dubbed Tuesday 5 September 'Dolle Dinsdag', or 'Mad Tuesday'.

The Allied pursuit began on 28 August with British tanks reaching Arras on 1 September; Brussels was liberated two days later, and by 6 September the advance was approaching the Dutch border in the face of stiffening German resistance. In an effort to maintain the momentum Allied Supreme Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower authorised Operation Market Garden, which was intended to bypass the Westwall fixed defences guarding the German frontier and open a route into the North German Plain and thus the heart of the Third Reich.

Operation Market was the largest airborne operation in history and involved landing 40,000 men from three Allied airborne divisions along a 60-mile corridor running north from the Belgian border to the Dutch city of Arnhem on the Lower Rhine, tasked to seize and hold 17 bridges across eight separate waterways starting at the Wilhelmina Canal just north of Eindhoven. The operation began on 17 September 1944 with the US 101st Airborne Division assigned to secure the southern third of the corridor; the centre portion including the city of Nijmegen was the responsibility of the US 82nd Airborne Division; and the furthest third was allotted to the British 1st Airborne Division.

The ground component of the operation, code named 'Garden', tasked British 30 Corps – spearheaded by the Guards Armoured Division – to break through the coalescing German defence on the Belgian border and advance rapidly up the airborne corridor, relieving each crossing in turn. All this was scheduled to take 48 hours. In the event, the two US airborne divisions secured all their allotted objectives, although the first bridge

across the Wilhelmina Canal was destroyed, prompting a 36-hour delay compounded by the tardy performance of 30 Corps, while the road and rail bridges across the River Waal at Nijmegen were not secured until the evening of 20 September, 24 hours behind schedule.

Matters went most awry at Arnhem, however, despite a near flawless delivery. The 1st Airborne Division's plan was to despatch the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron and the 1st Parachute Brigade to secure the objectives in Arnhem. The bulk of the first lift would remain at the landing area until the second lift arrived on the following day, after which the entire division would move as one into Arnhem.

As it turned out, only a small part of the 1st Parachute Brigade managed to slip through to the north end of the Arnhem road bridge, where they held the objective for 80 rather than 48 hours before being overwhelmed after an epic siege. The remainder of the 1st Parachute Brigade fought itself to destruction trying to reach the bridge before being driven back to the main body of the 1st Airborne Division, which was blocked and surrounded at Oosterbeek, midway between the landing area and Arnhem.

After another epic six-day siege that reduced Oosterbeek to rubble and the failure of three attempts to push reinforcements across the Lower Rhine, around 2,500 survivors were evacuated in small boats on the night of 25–26 September 1944. The evacuation effectively marked the end of Operation Market Garden.

Popular reasons for the failure

The search for reasons for the 1st Airborne Division's failure at Arnhem began as soon as Market Garden ended, and several recurring favourites have emerged over the years. These include landing the division in daylight; spreading the division landing across three lifts on successive days; and the seven-mile or so distance between the landing area and Arnhem. All of these were mandated by external factors, however, and they did not impact adversely on events at Arnhem.

First, because Market was launched in a no-moon period, a daylight insertion was unavoidable because paratroopers and glider pilots alike required a degree of natural light to judge depth and distance for landing. It should also be noted that the Market first lift was widely hailed as the most successful to date by experienced commanders from all three airborne divisions.

Second, the 1st Airborne was not alone in being delivered in multiple lifts spread over several days simply because there were insufficient transport aircraft available to deliver three complete airborne divisions simultaneously. The shortening autumn days ruled out flying more than one lift per day because it would involve taking off or returning in darkness, and while RAF aircrew were trained in night flying and navigation techniques, their USAF counterparts largely were not and also lacked trained navigators and ground crew.

Third, the landing area was selected because it was the closest site to Arnhem suitable for large-scale glider landings, as contemporary maps show. While the area at the south end of the Arnhem road bridge could have been used as a





parachute landing zone, the planners considered it too soft and riven with deep, wide drainage ditches for safe use by heavily laden gliders. Furthermore, the distance between the landing area and the objectives in Arnhem was not the handicap it is often painted as. The 2nd Parachute Battalion reached the Arnhem road bridge in just over four hours, fighting several small actions en route and while shepherding a number of personnel and vehicles from the brigade column and a variety of support units. This shows covering the seven miles was perfectly feasible providing the attackers moved with sufficient speed and application.

The myth of enemy action

Enemy action is another often-repeated reason for the failure, usually relying on two specific examples. SS Battalion Krafft, an approximately 400-strong replacement training unit billeted near Oosterbeek, is routinely credited with single-handedly holding back the 1st Parachute Brigade's advance to Arnhem until after dark on 17 September, largely due to a highly embellished and self-serving report by its commander, Hauptsturmführer Sepp Krafft.

The reality was in fact rather more prosaic. Krafft serendipitously deployed his unit along the eastern side of what was to be the 1st Airborne Division's main landing area in a bid to avoid Allied preparatory bombing, but its impact was far less than popularly claimed, amounting to a handful of relatively minor clashes.

One element was wiped out by the 2nd Parachute Battalion after straying onto the landing area; another spent several hours inconclusively skirmishing with a British unit defending the landing area; and a third caught two of the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron's Jeeps as they

belatedly began their move from the landing area to the Arnhem bridge.

The most significant clashes were with the 3rd Parachute Battalion on the outskirts of Oosterbeek, consisting of a brief hit-and-run ambush in the late afternoon followed by an inconclusive two-hour fight with the tail end of the 3rd Battalion column at dusk that ended when the SS element withdrew. None of this materially impacted the 1st Parachute Brigade's advance toward Arnhem, however, and any connected consequences were attributable to other factors.

The second popular myth with reference to enemy action is the recurring idea that the 1st Airborne Division landed atop two fully functioning panzer divisions. While II SS Panzerkorps, consisting of 9 and 10 SS Panzer Divisions, had been in the vicinity of Arnhem since 8 September, the fighting in Normandy and the retreat across northern France and Belgium had reduced them to a fraction of a single division in total, with a relative handful of vehicles and heavy equipment, the bulk of which were despatched south to Belgium to block the Allied ground advance on 13 September, four days before Market commenced.

By 17 September, 10 SS Panzer Division had been ordered to refit in place in Holland at three locations up to 30 miles east and north of Arnhem, while 9 SS Panzer Division had been ordered to hand over its surviving heavy equipment to its running mate, and the bulk of its personnel had already been despatched to Germany by rail to be re-equipped by the time Market began.

The remainder, mainly service and supply personnel denuded of almost all heavy equipment and motor transport, were scattered across

locations north and east of Arnhem between 16 and 35 miles from the landing area.

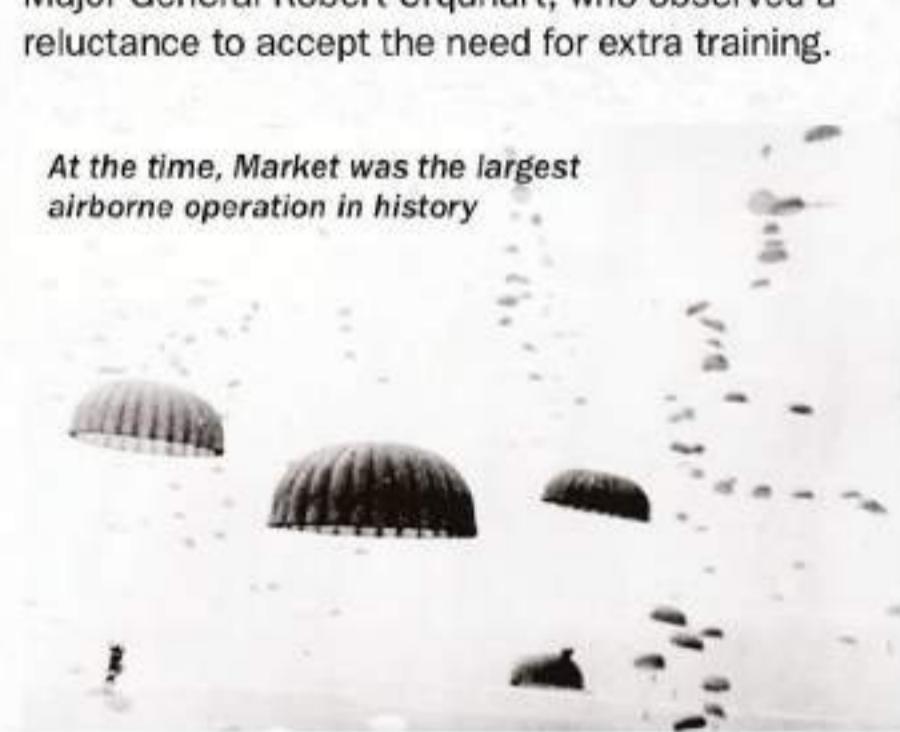
It is therefore clear that neither of II SS Panzerkorps' badly depleted formations were close to being under the 1st Airborne Division's landing and more importantly, none of 9 SS Panzer Division's elements were located between the landing area and Arnhem. They were therefore unable to seriously interfere with the 1st Parachute Brigade's advance into Arnhem in the first vital ten to 12 hours following the landing, when the British formation's battle for its objectives was ultimately won and lost.

Apart from the riverside loophole that permitted the 2nd Parachute Battalion to slip through to the Arnhem road bridge, German reactions and deployments were exemplary, however. II SS Panzerkorps HQ issued warning orders less than an hour after receiving reports of the landing; 9 SS Panzer Division's denuded units were on the way to the scene of the action within three hours; and within four hours Feldmarschall Walter Model had issued orders that framed the subsequent successful German conduct of the battle.

Unwarranted arrogance and poor discipline?

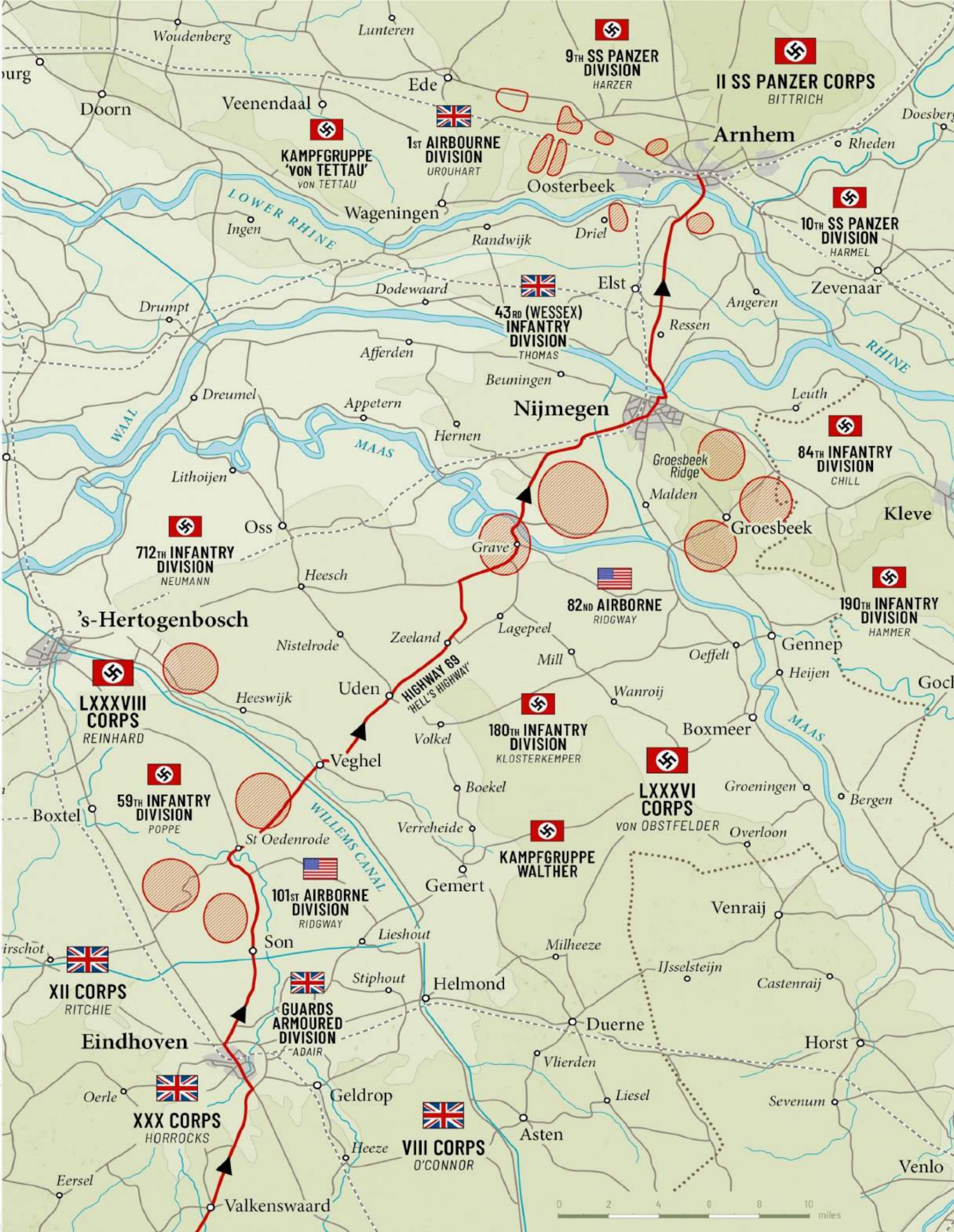
All this suggests that the reasons for the 1st Airborne Division's failure at Arnhem were a little closer to home, and at first glance the problem appears to be with the division's attitude as a whole. Although the glider and parachute operations carried out by two of its constituent brigades in Sicily were effectively fiascos, the 1st Airborne Division returned from the Mediterranean in November 1943 with an overwhelming sense of its experience and capabilities, tendencies noted not least by the division's new commander, Major General Robert Urquhart, who observed a reluctance to accept the need for extra training.

At the time, Market was the largest airborne operation in history



An Allied paratrooper makes an uncomfortable landing







Similarly, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Henniker from the division's Royal Engineer contingent referred to many surrounding themselves with a mystique that was not entirely justified by experience, while Major Philip Tower, who joined the division after its return to Britain, recognised the quality of his new airborne comrades but felt they overestimated their abilities and noted an unwillingness to acknowledge that any worthwhile experience was to be had outside the airborne fold. This is illustrated by an incident when umpires ruled against a particularly poorly co-ordinated attack by a 1st Airborne Division unit during Exercise *Mush* in April 1944, after which a company commander protested loudly that "you can't do this to us, we are the original Red Devils!"

The attitude manifested itself as indiscipline in the lower ranks, particularly within the 1st Parachute Brigade. Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost, who commanded the 2nd Parachute Battalion at Arnhem bridge, referred to low-level disciplinary problems across the whole brigade, from 'hard cases' disinclined to obey regulations to widespread absenteeism that interfered with training and disrupted unit cohesion, while the



commander of the 3rd Parachute Battalion was relieved after his battalion was unable to march on a test exercise.

The epicentre of indiscipline was the 1st Parachute Battalion, where one commander was posted away after tightening discipline with the aid of a Guards RSM, which the troops considered to be "treating battle-hardened men like children" and his replacement was not popular either. The feeling was mutual. Lieutenant-Colonel Kenneth Darling later recalled, "Frankly, I was horrified by 1 Para, they thought they knew all the answers, which they did not, and their discipline was not what I expected." The upshot was a mutiny on 30 March 1944, when the battalion refused to draw parachutes for a jump, which led to Darling being replaced by Lieutenant Colonel David Dobie, who led the 1st Battalion into Arnhem. In some instances the indiscipline spilled over into outright criminality. For example, on 12 February 1944 the local fire brigade had to be summoned after a smoke marker was ignited outside the Battalion Orderly Room, and just over a month later the safe in the battalion's NAAFI canteen was broken into and the funds stolen.

The obvious conclusion to draw from all this was that unwarranted arrogance and poor discipline were the reasons for the 1st Airborne Division's failure. However, events in Holland clearly show this was not the case. With regard to the 1st Parachute Brigade, the 2nd Parachute Battalion reached the Arnhem road bridge in just over four hours accompanied by the brigade column and other elements totalling approximately 740 men.

This force held the north end of the bridge for three and a half days, losing 81 dead and approximately 280 wounded in the process: almost 50 per cent of the force. They were only overwhelmed after running out of ammunition and food and being literally blasted out of mostly burning buildings by artillery and tanks.

The 1st Parachute Battalion spent 11 hours trying to reach its objective north of Arnhem, losing

11 dead and over 100 wounded before moving immediately to reinforce Frost at the road bridge. It then joined the 3rd Parachute Battalion in repeated unsuccessful attempts to break through the German blocking line in the western outskirts of Arnhem, during which both units fought themselves virtually to destruction.

By midday on Tuesday 19 September the 1st Parachute Battalion had been reduced to around 200 men from the 548 who had jumped in two days earlier, while the 588-strong 3rd Parachute Battalion had been reduced to just 60.

Neither was this level of raw courage and application unique to the 1st Parachute Brigade, as the fight in the outskirts of Arnhem took a similar toll on battalions from the 1st Airlanding Brigade and 4th Parachute Brigade and was then replicated across the entire gamut of the 1st Airborne Division's units in the subsequent six-day siege of Oosterbeek. This all strongly suggests that the 1st Parachute Brigade's indiscipline was largely a case of good field soldiers making poor garrison soldiers and that there was little wrong with the 1st Airborne Division up to the battalion level or equivalent, arrogance notwithstanding.

Poor planning and leadership

In fact, the root of the 1st Airborne Division's failure was higher up the chain of command, and at the very top. A regular officer commissioned in 1920, Major General Robert Elliot Urquhart assumed command of the 1st Airborne Division on 10 January 1944 having risen from the rank of major to major general in the course of war service in a variety of staff positions, including a 13-month stint on the staff of the 51st Highland Division while it was stationed in North Africa.

This was followed by his sole operational command appointment – four months commanding 231st Infantry Brigade on the island of Sicily and in southern Italy. He never commanded or served with an airborne unit prior to assuming command of the 1st Airborne Division.

His relatively rapid progress and elevation to the latter command over better-qualified candidates was due to the intervention of Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery. Urquhart had been a Montgomery protégé since coming to the latter's notice when serving on the 3rd Infantry Division staff in October 1940, and he was given command of the 1st Airborne Division after Montgomery raised the idea with the commander of British 1st Airborne Corps, Major-General Frederick Browning. To be fair there is no evidence Urquhart sought the appointment, and he created a good impression at his new command, but circumstances conspired to prevent him properly grasping the operational implications, restrictions and realities of his new role.

In the five months before D-Day, Urquhart attended numerous conferences and planning meetings in or near London over 100 miles from his HQ in Lincolnshire, and after the invasion he was fully involved in preparing for a total of 15 cancelled operations. This was a punishing schedule, stress that was compounded by a bout of malaria that hospitalised him for almost a month in April 1944.

Urquhart's lack of airborne experience was clearly apparent in his planning for Arnhem, which elicited disbelief among senior US airborne commanders. For example, Brigadier General James Gavin, commanding the 82nd Airborne Division and the most experienced of all Allied airborne commanders, later likened Urquhart's scheme to a peacetime exercise.

Urquhart gave assembling his division in its entirety as much attention as accomplishing its mission, and his assumption that the Germans would permit it to sit in place for 24 hours before moving into Arnhem was fanciful, as the fact that the bulk of the 1st Airborne Division covered less than half the distance to Arnhem before being blocked and surrounded shows. Urquhart's thinking appears to have been rooted in conventional ground operations rather than what was required for an airborne insertion 60 miles behind enemy lines and thus suggests a fundamental misunderstanding

Lieutenant General Lewis H. Brereton (left), commander of the First Allied Airborne Army, shakes hands with Major General Urquhart





“URQUHART’S LACK OF AIRBORNE EXPERIENCE WAS CLEARLY APPARENT IN HIS PLANNING FOR ARNHEM, WHICH ELICITED DISBELIEF AMONG SENIOR US AIRBORNE COMMANDERS”

of the realities of airborne operations. Urquhart compounded his unrealistic planning with a series of poor decisions after Market was launched, to the extent it can be argued he did not make a single correct decision in his first two days on the ground in Holland.

He failed to clarify the division command succession until boarding the glider for Arnhem, a basic precaution and a vital one in airborne operations, given the routine risks inherent in aerial delivery even without enemy action. In the event, his chief of staff was obliged to mitigate the consequences with diplomacy in the midst of the battle when Urquhart abruptly left his HQ shortly after landing in response to an erroneous rumour that the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron had failed to arrive in Holland.

Instead of checking the veracity of the rumour, Urquhart summoned the Squadron Commander, Major Freddie Gough, to Division HQ by radio before racing off in a Jeep to inform Brigadier Lathbury and the 1st Parachute Brigade in person. This panicked, knee-jerk summons from Urquhart separated Major Gough from his command for the remainder of the

battle and effectively ended the squadron's coup-de-main mission.

More seriously, it can be argued that at this point Urquhart effectively abdicated command of the 1st Airborne Division as he disappeared with no explanation or contact arrangements and then deliberately severed radio contact with his HQ, which was never re-established. His arrival at the 3rd Parachute Battalion at dusk was instrumental in that unit abandoning its move to Arnhem and halting in Oosterbeek for the night. Urquhart then chose to remain with the 3rd Battalion, remaining out of contact with his HQ and the rest of the division and thus unable to exert any influence on the developing battle, until the late afternoon of 18 September. He then made an ill-advised attempt to regain his HQ accompanied by Brigadier Gerald Lathbury that ended with Lathbury being badly wounded and captured and Urquhart trapped in an attic for 12 hours before finally regaining his HQ at 7:25 a.m. on 19 September after a 40-hour absence. By that time the initial window of opportunity had gone and the Arnhem portion of Operation Market had effectively failed.

That is not to say that Urquhart was a bad or incompetent commander. He did a more than adequate job of rallying his division and establishing a defensible perimeter at Oosterbeek while in contact with the enemy, and he then orchestrated the defence of that perimeter under ever-increasing German pressure. When it became clear this was unsustainable and permission was granted to withdraw across the river, Urquhart planned and implemented an evacuation inspired by the retreat from Gallipoli during WWI codenamed Operation Berlin, which succeeded in lifting over 2,000 men across the Lower Rhine on the night of 25–26 September. All that came after the airborne assault at Arnhem had morphed into a conventional defensive infantry battle, however, and the evidence strongly suggests that Urquhart did not fully grasp the realities of airborne operations. That lack of understanding contributed significantly to the failure of the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem and, by extension, to the failure of Operation Market Garden.

The Arnhem portion of Market might still have succeeded in spite of Urquhart's errors had the 1st Parachute Brigade managed to seize and hold the objectives in the city. This was not to be, however, as the brigade commander was only marginally more experienced himself. Brigadier Gerald Lathbury was commissioned in 1926 and his war service consisted of a number of separate

staff appointments at the War Office interspersed with eight months overseeing the raising of the 3rd Parachute Battalion and four months performing the same role with the 3rd Parachute Brigade.

He assumed command of the 1st Parachute Brigade on 25 April 1943 and led its operation to seize the Primasole Bridge in Sicily three months later. The operation was a fiasco as the brigade was scattered up to 20 miles from its objective, the ground force took 48 rather than 12 hours to arrive, and Lathbury was wounded in the back and legs during the fighting. These circumstances have concealed the unsuitability of Lathbury's plan, however, which employed six widely separated landing zones before dispersing the brigade over three separate locations spread across more than five square miles. This ruled out mutual support and breached the military maxim on maintaining focus on the primary aim. In fairness, there was not a great deal of airborne experience to draw upon in 1943, but Lathbury went on to commit exactly the same errors at Arnhem, where again circumstances conspired to conceal the fact.

Lathbury's Arnhem plan was a slight reworking of an earlier scheme codenamed Comet and envisaged sending the armed Jeeps of the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron ahead to seize the Arnhem bridge followed by the brigade's three battalions moving along three parallel and widely spaced routes. The 1st Parachute Battalion was allotted the northern route, codenamed Leopard, the 3rd Parachute Battalion was assigned the centre Tiger route, and the 2nd Parachute Battalion was allocated the southern Lion route along the

Lower Rhine. This dispersed the brigade's combat power, ruled out mutual support and obliged each battalion to fight in isolation. The plan thus resembled a peacetime training exercise, an impression reinforced by the objectives selected. These isolated a third of the brigade on high ground north of Arnhem and dispersed a third across the pontoon bridge, the Arnhem rail bridge and the German HQ in the centre of Arnhem, with the remaining third holding the Arnhem road bridge.

Given that most of these tasks required a full battalion at minimum, the plan was a classic case of trying to do too much with too little and virtually guaranteed that the 1st Parachute Brigade's sub-units would be isolated, overwhelmed and defeated in detail.

Once on the ground in Holland, Lathbury exacerbated the flaws in his plan by micromanaging his subordinate commanders to a degree that interfered with their ability to carry out their assigned missions. This began by needlessly holding the battalions at the landing area for over an hour before releasing them despite the time-sensitive nature of the operation, and then motoring between the widely dispersed battalion routes urging the commanders to greater haste.

By early evening Lathbury was running the 3rd Parachute Battalion over the head of its commander near Oosterbeek. He ordered an unnecessary counterattack against elements of Battalion Krafft that fired on the tail of the battalion column as it was moving away from the attackers and then compounded this by ordering the 3rd Battalion to halt in Oosterbeek for the night,

presumably to protect Major General Urquhart after he turned up unescorted at dusk. Lathbury then refused a radio appeal for assistance from his brigade major at the Arnhem road bridge on the grounds that his men were tired.

Thereafter he effectively abdicated command by accompanying an equally passive Urquhart in remaining with the 3rd Parachute Battalion until he was wounded and captured while attempting to regain his HQ on 18 September. All this does not necessarily mean Lathbury was an incompetent officer. His inadequate planning was attributable to inexperience and a lack of higher guidance. His micromanaging was presumably due to his formation's disciplinary problems, and abandoning his mission to protect his superior was likely the result of his conditioning as a regular officer.

Nonetheless, it is perhaps instructive to note that the elements of the 1st Parachute Brigade that reached the Arnhem road bridge or fought themselves to destruction trying to reach it did so without Lathbury's direct involvement.

It can therefore be seen that there was more to the failure of the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem than popular assumptions about landing areas, drop arrangements and enemy action, and that the underlying reasons were poor planning and leadership at the brigade and division level.

Given the exemplary courage and tenacity exhibited by the men of the 1st Airborne Division in Holland, it is interesting to speculate on how the Arnhem portion of Operation Market might have turned out differently with more experienced hands at the helm.

American troops attempt to free trapped GIs from the wreckage of a crash-landed Waco glider



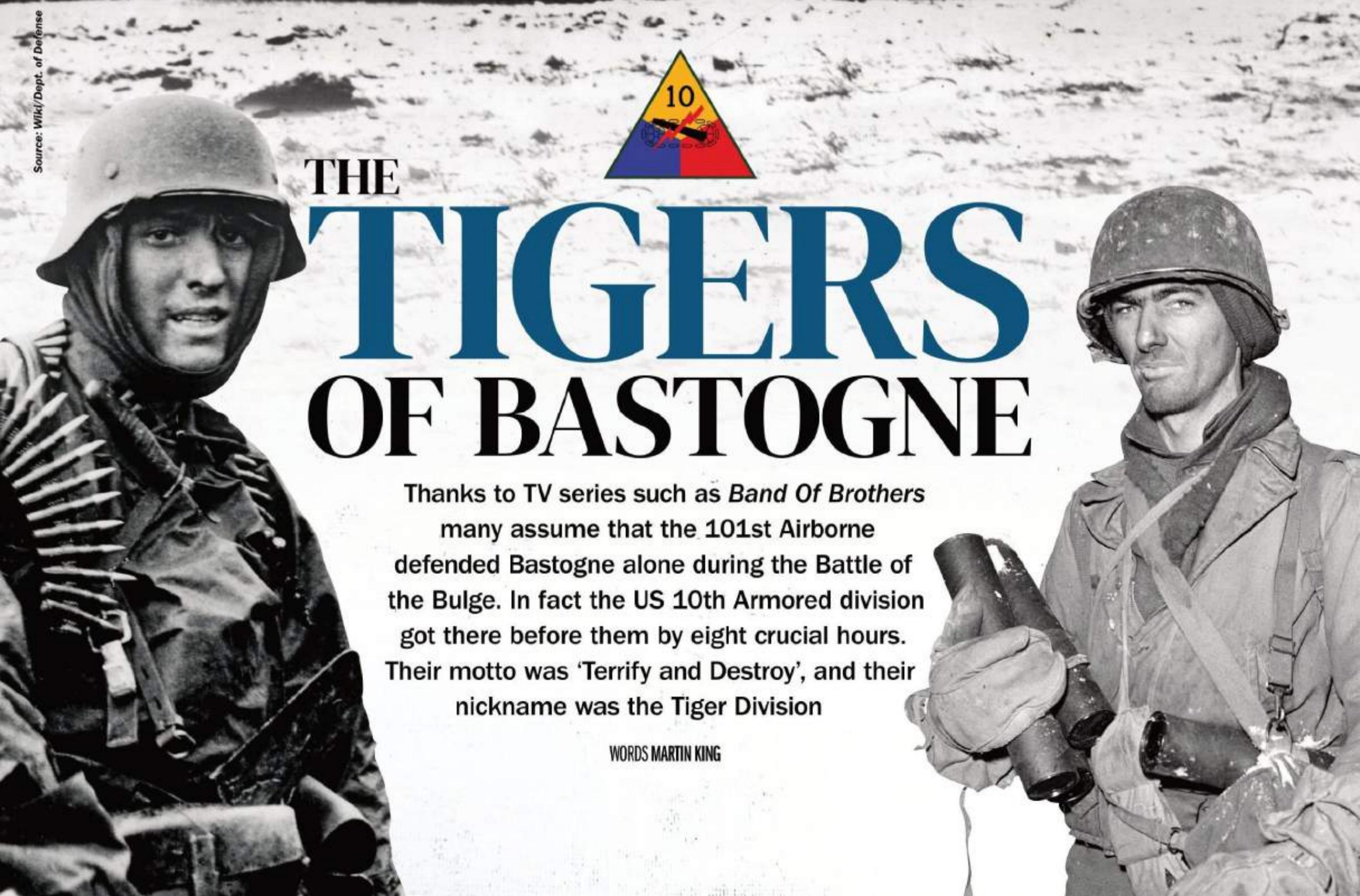
A British officer is captured in civilian clothes by Waffen-SS soldiers





Image: Alamy

Source: Wiki/Dept. of Defense



THE **TIGERS** OF BASTOGNE

Thanks to TV series such as *Band Of Brothers* many assume that the 101st Airborne defended Bastogne alone during the Battle of the Bulge. In fact the US 10th Armored division got there before them by eight crucial hours. Their motto was 'Terrify and Destroy', and their nickname was the Tiger Division

WORDS MARTIN KING



Image: Alamy

On 16 December 1944, at 5.30 a.m. in a salient just east of the Belgian-German frontier, dispersed wide along an area known as the Schnee Eifel, green troops of the 106th Golden Lion Division were rudely awakened from their winter sojourn by spectral red, green, amber and white thunder flashes irradiating the misty predawn sky. Moments later they heard the terrifying whine of 'Screamin meemies', Nazi 'Nebelwerfers' simultaneously belching out multiple mortar shells accompanied by booming artillery that collectively gouged and fractured the frigid earth where they stood. John Schaffner, a scout with 589th Field Artillery Battalion said, "Many rounds exploded real close and showered dirt and tree limbs about. I got down as low as I could and would have crawled into my helmet if my buttons hadn't gotten in the way." Shortly after these vulnerable American troops heard the menacing throaty rumble of approaching Tiger and Panther tanks.

"I was in a chateau in Sierck, France. I was told by a runner to return to HQ," said Clair Bennett, F Company, 90th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized). "As we were moving out, we found out that the Germans were attacking Belgium."

Image: Getty

Opposite page, top: A German Tiger II pictured during the Ardennes counteroffensive, which became known as the Battle of the Bulge, December 1944

Opposite page, left: A heavily armed German soldier marches into Belgium

Opposite page, right: A tired American soldier back from the front lines near the town of Murrigen during the Battle of the Bulge

That same day the US 12th Army Group commander General Omar Bradley began to acknowledge fragmentary reports concerning enemy activity in the Ardennes. This didn't deter him from attending his planned conference with Eisenhower at the Hôtel Trianon Palace in Versailles. The conference was attended by Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder and generals Walter Bedell Smith, Harold R. Bull (his chief G-3, part of the American military intelligence operations) and Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence Major General Kenneth Strong. The proceedings were suddenly interrupted when an American deputy G-2 entered the conference room and delivered a message to Strong, who promptly got to his feet and officially disclosed the subject matter. "Gentlemen, your attention please. This morning the enemy counterattacked at five separate points along Middleton's VIII Corps boundary in the 1st Army sector."

The statement was received with hushed exchanges as all officers present began to absorb the news. Bradley displayed his usual incredulity and broke the silence; "Ike, this is nothing more than a spoiling attack intended to draw Patton's troops out of the Saar." Eisenhower shook his head in disagreement. "This is no spoiling attack, Brad." Then Eisenhower made what was quite possibly one of his most coherent decisions of the whole war when he issued orders to dispatch the 10th and 7th Armored Divisions to the Ardennes with all haste. 7th Armored would go to the German-speaking Belgian town of St Vith and the 10th Armored were earmarked to get up to Bastogne.

Throughout the ensuing discussion Bradley remained in denial concerning the nature and

purpose of the German attack despite the fact that the US 1st Army's G-2 had already transmitted a captured copy of German Field Marshall von Rundstedt's 'Order of the Day' to SHAEF. This document plainly illustrated the German objectives.

The following day Eisenhower committed his strategic reserve, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, to head north to the Ardennes. Precisely which division would go where would be determined while the paratroopers were en route to the forest. Poorly prepared and unsuitably attired, they would endure a freezing 13-hour ride in the backs of open tank transporters.

Bastogne is the main city in the Belgian province of Luxembourg that rests on an elevated plateau in the heart of the Belgian Ardennes. On a clear day it provides a commanding view of the surrounding area. Being centrally located, and where seven roads converged, it became a key strategic objective for both sides during this epic battle.

Middleton's moves

On 16 December, the VIII Corps Commander, 55-year-old Major General Troy Middleton's HQ was located at the former Belgian army barracks on the northeast perimeter of Bastogne, where it had been established since early September 1944. VIII Corps were lucky to have him.

Sporting glasses as thick as jam jar bottoms and pugnacious features, Middleton was destined to be the right man in the right place at the right time. He had an impeccable combat record and was widely regarded as one of the most competent battlefield tacticians in the US Army during WWII. According to reports reaching his desk on that fateful day, the Germans were slicing through American lines like



a hot knife through butter along an 89-mile front stretching from Aachen in the north all the way down to Luxembourg in the south. He had to act and act fast.

The market town of Bastogne was garlanded with Christmas decorations in anticipation of the approaching festive season. As news filtered through to the resident garrison of men from the 28th Division Pennsylvania National Guard, the city became a hive of activity. Still licking their wounds after losing four-fifths of their number in the Battle of Hürtgen Forest, the 28th prepared to move out east to meet their adversaries.

At his HQ in the northern Luxembourg town of Wiltz, D-Day hero General 'Dutch' Cota attempted to relay information to Middleton, who now faced the arduous task of formulating a cohesive plan to preserve and maintain his wafer-thin defences against this increasingly threatening tirade of German troops and armour. He instinctively knew that he needed to slow or stem the advance and buy time for the 1st and 3rd Armies.

While the 9th Armored Division's CCR (Combat Command Reserve) covered the left flank of the 4th Infantry Division in Luxembourg, the 28th Infantry Division straddled the Our River and attempted to hold the centre ground. Just to the north of their position was the inexperienced 106th Infantry Division covering an area that extended almost 26 miles right up to the VIII Corps boundary with V Corps. Despite being unaware of the magnitude of the German attack, Middleton managed to organise his thin defences in such a way that they would inevitably stagger and frustrate the enemy advance.

When Manteuffel said after the war that German momentum began to dissipate in some sectors in those first crucial 24 hours, this can largely be attributed to Middleton's efforts.

Sending in the Tiger Division

Up until 16 December SHAEF had considered the Ardennes as the quiet sector, where very little had transpired up until that juncture. On the Luxembourg-German frontier the 28th's 110th Regiment was covering over 11 miles in the centre of the division sector. Like the 106th Infantry Division in the northern sector, they were strung out far too thin to offer any concerted resistance. As overwhelming waves of German troops and armour struck out west in an attempt to reach the River Meuse the American line gradually began to disintegrate. They were being attacked by General Hasso von Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army, which was the least provisioned but the best led of all the three German armies that had launched the assault at 5.30 a.m. with the vain objective of eliminating all Allied resistance and re-taking Antwerp.

During that first day of the assault five German divisions swarmed across the Our River that snaked along the Luxembourg-German border roughly 25 miles east of Bastogne. Two Panzer corps on Manteuffel's left flank soon devastated the thin lines of the 28th Division. On 16 December German forces on the Wiltz-Bastogne road had progressed rapidly, and by late afternoon they were close to the city. The first German bomb to hit Bastogne impacted just outside the church of Saint Peter around midday.

The 10th Armored Division war room ticker clicked into life at 3.30 a.m. on 17 December as movement orders began to arrive. At that time the division was in the northern French town of Rémeling recuperating after heavy fighting around Metz. On receiving the news, commanding officer of Combat Command B, 54-year-old Colonel William L. Roberts, wasted no time in assembling his officers for an urgent briefing. The bespectacled Roberts had a sallow complexion and a demeanour more reminiscent of a funeral director than an army commander. He was known as a dour, feisty individual who never shied away from a fight. One of his subordinates, young Major William R. Desobry, known as 'Des' to his friends, furrowed his brow as Roberts explained the urgency of the situation developing further north in the Ardennes region. Desobry's face and gaunt features made him appear considerably older than his 26 years.

Lieutenant Colonel Henry T. Cherry and 'Smiling' Lieutenant Colonel James O'Hara were also present. Cherry was known to be a strict disciplinarian who didn't lend his military acumen to spontaneous improvisation and preferred doing things by the book. The eldest of the three 'Team' commanders, he admired General Patton greatly and to some extent attempted to emulate him.

O'Hara smiled. Even when the November rains had inundated the battlefields and the fighting had intensified around Metz, O'Hara had always sported a wide, toothy grin that accentuated the roundness of his ruddy complexion. While some of his fellow officers found his smile reassuring and inspiring, others regarded it as downright disturbing.

The 10th Armored Division

Activated at Fort Benning, Georgia, on 15 July 1942, the 10th Armored Division was assigned to Patton's 3rd Army on arriving at Cherbourg on 23 September 1944

While the US 10th Armored Division's Combat Command A were ordered to join the 4th Infantry Division at Echternach in Luxembourg to stem the attack of Brandenberger's 7th Panzer Army, Combat Command B was dispatched to Bastogne. They were the first of Patton's 3rd Army units to reach the town, on 18 December 1944, and would precede the arrival of the 101st Airborne by about eight hours.

"When we arrived in Bastogne it was quite quiet and there were no civilians around," said Earl van Gorp, D Company, 3rd Tank Battalion. The civilians who hadn't managed to escape the city had taken to their cellars in anticipation of the approaching German offensive.

The 10th Armored Division, nicknamed 'The Tiger Division', had arrived in Europe that September and actively participated in Patton's battles around Metz.

When the three CCB teams arrived in Bastogne they were sent out to block three primary approach roads against overwhelming numbers of attacking German forces from Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army. During those first integral 48 hours, although heavily outnumbered, they tenaciously refused to concede a single inch of ground and inflicted terrible casualties on the Germans.

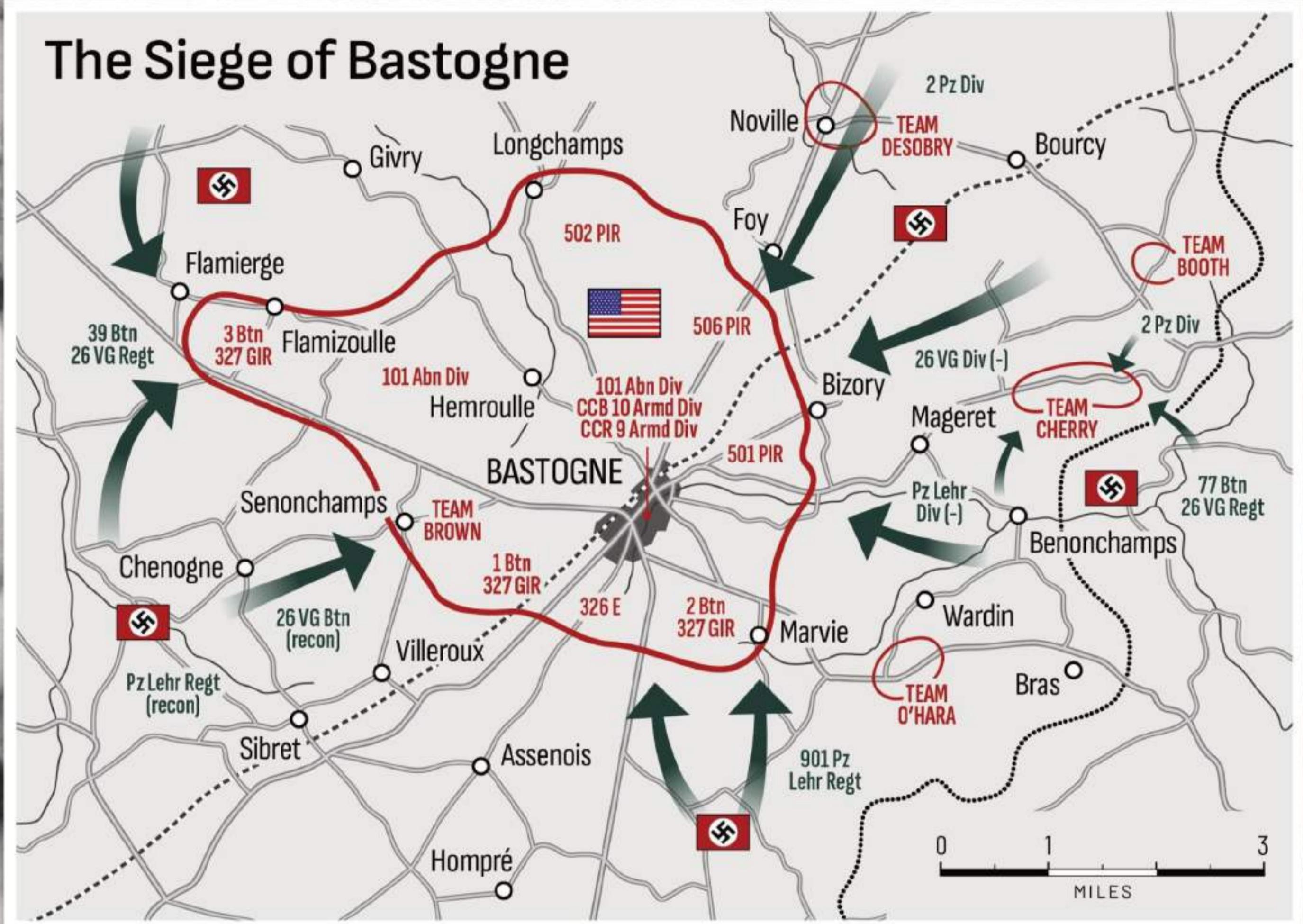
When the city became surrounded, survivors from Team Desobry and Team Cherry became Bastogne's 'fire brigade', a mobile reserve ready to strike where and when they were needed. Their fight didn't end when Patton's 4th Armored division entered Bastogne on the afternoon of 26 December; the CCB would provide additional armoured support and assist in deterring successive attempts by the Germans to take Bastogne until 18 January 1945.

"ALTHOUGH HEAVILY OUTNUMBERED, THEY TENACIOUSLY REFUSED TO CONCEDE A SINGLE INCH OF GROUND AND INFILCTED TERRIBLE CASUALTIES ON THE GERMANS"

An infantryman pauses during an advance through a forest



The Siege of Bastogne



THE TIGERS OF BASTOGNE





"Move at a moment's notice"

"Hell Colonel, we're Patton's 3rd Army but when we get up there we'll be 1st Army," moaned Desobry while shaking his head. Roberts peered above his glasses. "I don't think that will be a primary concern when you meet the enemy, Des." The colonel wasn't entirely sure what to make of the recent reports, but an uncomfortable feeling in his lower abdomen indicated that if his instincts were right all was not well. He rose to his feet and addressed all three officers. "Get the men ready to move at a moment's notice." With a dismissive wave he concluded the meeting and sat down again to peruse the maps laid out on his desk.

Later on that same bitterly cold morning, as the first hesitant rays of daylight began to illuminate the horizon of 10th Armored Division's camp, reveille was accompanied by rousing calls to action. Within minutes frenzied activity erupted across the whole of the encampment.

Stubble-faced GIs with heavy-lidded eyes began laboriously loading up supplies of arms and ammunition onto various forms of transport in preparation for an imminent move north to Bastogne. The crisp dawn air was soon imbued with choking black exhaust fumes as a plethora of military engines groaned into life.

M3 half-tracks, M4 Sherman tanks, M10 and M18 tank destroyers began carving deep furrows through the hoar frost as they formed up the column to begin the ride north. By 1.20 p.m. on 17 December, in compliance with orders, Combat Command B, 10th Armored Division, was making its first tentative steps toward Bastogne. Something big was happening up there.

Three teams, one aim

Major Willis D. 'Crit' Crittenberger, HQ battery, 420th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, said, "We heard about the Bulge because we always tuned our half-track radios to the BBC. Around 2.00 a.m. we got a warning order from Division HQ saying they were getting ready to go north. Then at 8.00 a.m. we got our orders to be part of CCB and go to Bastogne. On the 17th we drove 60 miles up to Luxembourg and stayed overnight."

Robert's Combat Command B (CCB) numbering just 2,700 men, would be divided into three teams each named after their appointed commander. On the late afternoon of 18 December CCB arrived in Bastogne and Roberts promptly reported to Middleton, who issued specific instructions to organise roadblocks at the three main approaches to the city.

While Team Desobry headed three miles straight north to Noville, Team Cherry wheeled east to Longvilly, and Team O'Hara pivoted southeast to Bras. The remaining CCB forces were kept in Luxembourg to prevent the Germans from hitting Bastogne from the south. These three teams would be the first line of defence around Bastogne until reinforcements arrived.

Wayne Wickert of C Company, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion, 10th Armored Division, joined Team Cherry out at Longvilly. He recalled, "When we arrived at Longvilly a captain asked me, 'Are you an engineer?' 'Yes, sir,' I replied. 'In that case I may have a bridge for you to blow up.' In my truck I had about 25 landmines with eight pounds of TNT, and pipes full of TNT in it to shove into roadblocks to clear the way. [I also had] a couple of five-gallon

cans of TNT for bridges. When the Germans began firing I went across the road and got up a real steep hill because the Germans were aiming at my truck. I got behind an evergreen tree, and I lay down in a prone position with my rifle. Next thing I knew I felt something on my neck and I thought I was going to get the bayonet. When I pulled myself up my arm started flapping around: shrapnel had hit me. Then as small arms tore up the ground medics just grabbed my shirt and started running down the hill, and they were not a bit careful. I was holding my arm, and the bone was sticking out as they carried me down [and] the bone got stuck on a tree.

"I jumped on a half-track and held on but asked if I could sit down. I was exhausted. I backed up to the door as blood congealed in my sleeve. There was a solid clot of blood that slid out, and when it hit the floor, the radioman threw up. As he jumped outside a machine gun cut loose, and I could hear the tinning on the side of the half-track. There was a tank there, a Sherman, which silenced the gun.

"When I got to an aid station in a house, they put some dressing and a steel rod on my arm and wrapped it up close to my body. A medic stuck a needle in my vein that was spurting, and I was going to ask him about the needle but I passed out. When I woke up the first thing I looked for was my arm, which thankfully was still attached. I received seven pints of blood after that and was transferred to England."

"Hold at all costs"

After his meeting with Middleton during the late afternoon of 18 December, Roberts connected with the vanguard of his column one mile south of the

Three American M4 Sherman tanks at St Vith during the Battle of the Bulge



"WHEN I WOKE UP THE FIRST THING I LOOKED FOR WAS MY ARM, WHICH THANKFULLY WAS STILL ATTACHED. I RECEIVED SEVEN PINTS OF BLOOD AFTER THAT AND WAS TRANSFERRED TO ENGLAND"

city, whereupon, after briefly scanning a map and choosing a favourable position for the armoured artillery, he relayed Middleton's orders to the respective team commanders.

Physically getting into the city was no easy matter because access to the southern approach roads was becoming severely impeded by corps personnel and an increasing number of stragglers homing in from the east. Some of these were assigned as military police to supplement the MPs already assigned to CCB. They would be dispatched to intersections to the south and southeast of Bastogne armed with strict instructions to prevent any soldiers attempting to escape the coming battle and turn them back to the CCB area.

At 6.15 p.m., as the long winter night descended, Bastogne CCB, now under the direct control of VIII Corps, were provided with additional units, the 35th and 158th combat engineer battalions, to augment their forces. These two units were designated as infantry to enhance the defence of the city. Remnants of various other units who were drifting back to Bastogne would be allocated later.

Roberts sent out a detail to retrieve these stragglers and billet them at locations in proximity to his CP at the Hotel LeBrun on the Rue Marche just a few yards from the city's main square. He managed to assemble around 250 men, mostly from the 28th Infantry Division and some from the 9th Armored Division. Collectively, this ad hoc reserve became known as the SNAFU unit (Situation Normal All Fouled Up).

The three teams, supported by three batteries of the 420th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, would be tasked with establishing defensive blocking positions to hinder or prevent the advancing enemy forces from capturing this key city, with specific instructions from Middleton to "hold at all costs". They would face the full force of that German onslaught alone until reinforcements from one of the airborne divisions reached the city.

Heroes of Bastogne

The Battle of the Bulge called for many acts of heroism and examples of bold leadership



P.T. JOHN SCHAFFNER,
SCOUT 589TH FAB, 106TH
INFANTRY DIVISION

Two regiments of the 106th Infantry Division (around 6,800 men) surrendered. Schaffner was one of the lucky ones, as his unit managed to escape and fight on.



CLAIR BENNETT, F COMPANY,
90TH CAVALRY RECONNAISSANCE
SQUADRON (MECHANISED)

The 90th endured a hard fight out at Longvilly but by 28 December the 1st and 2nd platoons had been assigned as mobile reserve for Team Cherry.



LIEUTENANT GENERAL TROY
HOUSTON MIDDLETON AND
GENERAL EISENHOWER
Both General Patton and General Bradley requested Troy Middleton's assistance. His abilities as a military tactician were in great demand at SHAEF.



COLONEL WILLIAM LYNN
ROBERTS, COMMANDER CCB,
10TH ARMORED DIVISION
On 20 December Middleton told Roberts, "Your work has been quite satisfactory." From that point on CCB were attached to the 101st Airborne Division.



MAJOR WILLIAM DESOBRY:

- 'TEAM DESOBRY'

After the Battle of the Bulge Desobry went on to become a two-star major general and served during the Vietnam War. He retired in 1975.



LIEUTENANT COLONEL
HENRY THOMAS CHERRY, JR.
- 'TEAM CHERRY'

Cherry was a West Point graduate who did things by the book. Regarded as an excellent tank tactician, he died in 1953 while serving as a US Army colonel.



LIEUTENANT 'SMILING' JAMES
O'HARA - 'TEAM O'HARA'

Lieutenant James O'Hara was awarded the Silver Star for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity while serving with the 10th Armored Division during WWII.



MAJOR WILLIS D. 'CRIT'
CRITTENBERGER, JR., HQ
BATTERY 420TH AFAB

Crittenberger, Jr., was promoted to lieutenant colonel on Christmas Eve 1944 by General Patton, who also awarded him a Legion of Merit.



PHILIP WILLIAM 'PHIL' BURGE,
C COMPANY, 55TH ARMORED
ENGINEER BATTALION

Phil became the secretary of the 10th Armored Division Association and returned to Bastogne many times before he passed away on 9 March 2018.

Images: Michael Collins 10th Armored Division Historian, Martin King, National Archives



US soldiers fire at German positions to relieve besieged airborne troops in Bastogne, Belgium



FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN

German troops
advance past
abandoned
American
equipment



THE TIGERS OF BASTOGNE





"When we got into Noville around midnight we heard that the enemy was coming down the road and they fired on the outpost," said Jerry Gookasian, B Company, 3rd Tank Battalion. "This was the first connection with the Germans around the area of Bastogne on the night of the 18th. The Germans pulled back because they believed they had run into a bigger force than they actually had. The half-track behind us got hit and that was flaring up all night. Ziggy, my driver, and I got some .50 calibre ammunition from the burning half-track because we were desperate for ammunition."

"Never heard of Bastogne"

Precisely why Bastogne was so important to the Germans became self-evident during the battle. OKW (High Command) had identified the strategic location of the city during the initial planning stages for the offensive. It had been generally agreed that the two key cities of Bastogne and St Vith needed to be taken within the first 24 hours of the offensive if they were to succeed in their intended objective of recapturing Antwerp. Many of Hitler's generals at the time had been reduced to obsequious nodding sycophants who didn't dare to voice their reservations about the plan known as 'Wacht am Rhein' (Watch on the Rhine). Feldmarschall Walter Model was one of the very few who openly disagreed with the whole plan at a time when Hitler's temperament was at best unpredictable and at worst murderous.

One of the reasons for this may have been the abortive attempt on his life that occurred in July 1944 instigated by General von Stauffenberg and other high-ranking military men. It was while recuperating from injuries sustained during this failed assassination attempt that the Führer ruminated on the prospects of going on the offensive in the West. General Hasso-Eckard Freiherr von Manteuffel, general of the 5th Army, also harboured serious reservations, which he voiced to Von Rundstedt, who secretly concurred,

but neither dared to openly state their opinions. The semantics and machinations of the planned German offensive were superfluous to the 10th Armored CCB as the teams arrived to take up positions at their pre-designated locations.

"I remember going through the town of Arlon in the afternoon of December 18th. It was a scene out of a Christmas card. It was snowing, but the Christmas lights were on, people were shopping and it was about the prettiest scene you could ever imagine. After passing through Arlon we made a turn in the road and the truck headlights showed a sign saying 'Bastogne', white letters on a dark blue background. I had never heard of Bastogne, but something told me that it was a name that I would never forget," recalled Phil Burge, C Company, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion. "We reached Bastogne by 7.00 or 8.00 p.m. We spent the first night in the railroad station."

"Put those tank destroyers on point and gather all the ammo you can lay your hands on. Good luck and God be with you," shouted Major William Desobry to his advance guard, comprising of an intelligence and reconnaissance platoon, 20th AIB, and a section of 1st Platoon, troop D, 90th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (CRS). They had entered Noville at around 10.00 p.m. At the time nobody suspected that the 'perfect storm' was about to break. A soldier from an armoured platoon that had fallen back into Noville near midnight provided Desobry with a graphic description of the enemy forces that were heading in their direction, adding, "The whole goddam German army is heading this way, major."

"I HAD NEVER HEARD OF BASTOGNE, BUT SOMETHING TOLD ME THAT IT WAS A NAME THAT I WOULD NEVER FORGET"

In the thick of the fog

Team Cherry had been warned that they might encounter elements of the US 9th Armored Division's CCR along the way. When they arrived in Longvilly they were dismayed to discover the whole village jam-packed with CCR vehicles retreating in apparent disorder. Tanks, trucks and troop-filled half-tracks produced a nigh on impossible traffic situation on the narrow approach road as Team Cherry endeavoured to get up to the line. The 9th Armored had been badly mauled while attempting to stem the German advance and had suffered terrible casualties, but it had been a valiant effort. "When anyone asks me where I was during the battle I tell them, 'Hell, I was everywhere,'" said Bob Sheehan, veteran of the 9th Armored.

Just three miles southeast of Bastogne, in the village of Warden, Team O'Hara established a road block on the high ground, but the elevation didn't provide any real advantage due to the all-encompassing fog that reduced visibility to ten yards in some places. They had no idea that they were in the path of General Fritz Bayerlein's dreaded Panzer Lehr and General Kokott's 26th Volksgrenadier Division currently striking out for Bastogne from the east.

All three team commanders were essentially faced with the same inclement weather problem. One Belgian-Congolese nurse named Augusta Chiwy who had returned from up north to spend Christmas with her father in Bastogne described the weather. "The fog was so thick you could cut it with a knife." As long as it persisted tactical air support was impossible. This 'Hitler Weather' was a potentially serious impediment, but some US forces managed to turn it to their advantage.

"They didn't know how many we had and we didn't know how many they had, we just had to fight like hell and hope for the best," said Bob Parker of C Company, 21st Tank Battalion. "There were a couple of divisions that had been overrun and they were retreating back through our lines. We had set

Image: Alamy



US Army infantrymen march on a road near Bastogne, Belgium, December 1944



The wreckage of a German tank, destroyed near Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes area of Belgium



The 'Carrefour', Bastogne, late December 1944. Street vendors sold postcards showing the damage Bastogne sustained during the battle

up a roadblock, and the next thing I knew, I saw something similar to our half-track or a truck. I shot it and I hit it. We lost a couple of tanks that first day. I think we had three left in our platoon at the end." Bob would later be re-assigned to the aptly named Team SNAFU.

The 101st Airborne 'Screaming Eagles' were originally designated to go to Werbomont on the northern shoulder to check the advance of the SS in that sector but were redirected to Bastogne when the 82nd Airborne got ahead of them on the road north through Luxembourg. With the commander General Maxwell Taylor back in Washington, D.C., attending a conference, Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe assumed command of the division.

As lead elements of the 101st Airborne Division trudged into Bastogne late on 18 December, McAuliffe immediately went to VIII Corps headquarters in Bastogne to talk with Middleton. The 101st received direct orders to take up positions in support of the CCB teams who were already in place.

One US veterans recalled, "O'Hara had been sent out to the southeast to block a road coming to the town of Wiltz, which was a high-speed road, and Cherry was moving out to the town of Longvilly to block that road, and I was going due north to a town of Noville and I was to block that road.

"They really didn't know what the situation was, except the Germans had broken through the 28th Division and were somewhere to the east of us; that Germans were using American equipment and some of them were dressed in American uniforms and some of them civilian uniforms. So you had to watch out for that."

A company of paratroopers from the 1st battalion, 506th, commanded by Lieutenant LaPrade, was ordered up to Noville to assist Team Desobry. When they arrived a slight altercation occurred between LaPrade and Desobry regarding who was in charge. Such details were superfluous to Phil Burge as he observed the paratroopers arriving in Bastogne. "They had come in by truck, since it was impossible to drop them in by air. Eventually the whole division of the 101st Airborne was in Bastogne. But we were there first."

Ten to one against

The fighting in Noville began in earnest at 5.30 a.m. on 19 December when a group of German 2nd Panzer Division half-tracks emerged from the fog. GIs manning an outpost on the Bourcy road that converged on the village of Noville couldn't determine whether they were friend or foe. In an attempt to discover the identity of the approaching vehicles a GI sentry shouted 'Halt!' four times. Suddenly a voice responded in German. That was the timely cue for Desobry's men to shower the lead vehicle with hand grenades. Several explosions followed as agonised, feral howls of pain and derision emanated from the half-track as spurts of blood and severed limbs were ejected into the freezing air. The GIs immediately dispatched the bloodied survivors who attempted to crawl out. Close-quarter fighting ensued for around 20 minutes as the opposing forces hammered away with grenades and small arms. It was 'game on'.

Despite overwhelming odds of around ten to one, in two days team Desobry disabled 31 tanks and halted the entire 2nd German Panzer

Division, which had assumed it was opposing a much stronger force. During the fighting Desobry was wounded and captured and LaPrade was killed outright when a bomb impacted their CP. Colonel Roberts repeatedly refused to give Desobry permission to fall back on Bastogne even when he was personally visited by Desobry, whose left eyeball was resting on his cheek due to the percussion from the blast that destroyed his CP. On 20 December Roberts finally acquiesced.

On 21 December the survivors of Team Cherry were ordered back to Bastogne and assigned to 101st Airborne Division's mobile reserve. Team O'Hara held out until Patton's 3rd Army arrived on 26 December. All three team leaders survived the battle. General Troy Middleton's expert delaying tactics and the 10th Armored CCB teams severely disrupted the German timetable. Bastogne would hold against repeated German attacks, but the gargantuan efforts of the men who got there first would be overshadowed by the exploits of the 101st Airborne Division.

General McAuliffe would later remark, "It seems regrettable to me that Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division didn't get the credit it deserved at the battle of Bastogne. All the newspaper and radio talk was about the paratroopers [of the 101st Airborne Division].

"Actually the 10th Armored division was in there a day before we were and had some very hard fighting before we ever got into it, and I sincerely believe that we would never have been able to get into Bastogne if it had not been for the defensive fighting of the three elements of the 10th Armored Division, who were first into Bastogne and protected the town from invasion by the Germans."

The 10th Armored Division left Bastogne for good on 17 and 18 January and headed to the Saar-Moselle triangle to continue their fight against the Third Reich. They would fight on through Germany and eventually cross the Danube into Czechoslovakia with Patton's 3rd Army. When the war concluded they were in the Austrian Alps 20 miles from Innsbruck.



The author of this article and official 10th Armored Division historian Mike Collins helped to organise a memorial plaque to the 10th Armored Division, which now stands beside a Sherman tank turret in Bastogne. It was unveiled and dedicated on 10 December 2011.

1945: INVADING THE REICH

OPERATION PLUNDER

WORDS MARTIN KING



At 9.00 p.m. on 23 March 1945, following weeks of almost continuous heavy aerial and artillery bombardments, Montgomery's 21st Army Group launched Operation Plunder. This would finally take the Allies across the River Rhine north of the industrial heartland of the Ruhr and place them in a strong position to deliver the coup de grâce against the Third Reich.



Martin is an author, award-winning documentary filmmaker and battlefield guide.

He has published histories on the Battle of the Bulge and the US 4th Infantry Division and regularly lectures on American and Allied operations during the liberation of Europe.



In the spring of 1945, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery was appointed to lead the last great offensive in the West. Just beyond the east bank of the swollen River Rhine was Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring, commanding around 80 rather depleted German divisions in sturdy defensive positions. The Rhine was going to be a formidable obstacle at that time of year, but it wasn't insurmountable. The Allies could deploy three armies in the coming

offensive: the Canadian 1st, the British 2nd and the US 9th. With the right plan and equipment this final natural barrier could be successfully navigated and, for Montgomery, the abject failure of Operation Market Garden the previous autumn could be consigned to history – not that he ever regarded it as a failure.

The Allies had already encroached on the borders of Hitler's thousand-year empire but had been caught napping at the Battle of the Bulge, which was in effect Hitler's last serious offensive

in the West. With Allied composure restored at the beginning of February 1945, almost half a million soldiers, with over 1,000 guns and 34,000 vehicles, had assembled along a six-mile front. They were prepared to remove the Germans from the Netherlands and reach the Rhine. For the British and Canadian troops it was the largest operation since Normandy and it proved to be a tough fight, but Montgomery had achieved his goal. Now he prepared for the next mission.

Artist's illustration of British LVTs crossing the Rhine



The infamous bridge at Remagen had been taken intact by the US 9th Armoured Division between 7 and 8 March 1945. Apart from costing Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt his job, the capture of this bridge enabled US forces to establish their first foothold on the eastern side of the Rhine. Further north General William Hood Simpson's US 9th Army held the west bank of the Rhine, from the south of Düsseldorf to the mouth of the Lippe River at the village of Wesel.

Patton strikes early

Despite the absence of official orders, General George Patton's US 5th (Diamond) Division established a six-mile-deep bridgehead after crossing the Rhine River during the night of 22 March 1945. Patton's commanding officer, General Omar Bradley, had issued express orders to prevent Patton from doing precisely this. Bradley was no fan of Montgomery but remained insistent that nothing should interfere with Operation Plunder.

Patton just wanted to have the puerile accolade of having crossed the Rhine before the British. In his head he really believed that he was in competition with Montgomery when in fact nothing could have been further from the truth. Montgomery was too far up the pecking order and far too arrogant to be troubled by the stubborn general and the machinations of his 3rd Army in the south. Nevertheless, Patton remained hell bent on glory and had every intention of leading the charge all the way to Berlin. This is probably the only thing he had in common with Field Marshal Montgomery, but as things transpired neither commander would be permitted that accolade.

Monty's immediate plan in the early spring of 1945 was to strike east on a relatively narrow frontage, which would bring the Allies in close proximity to the northern edge of the Ruhr cities. Once there, they would make contact with the US 1st Army and in effect take full possession

of the area that Allied air command had failed to subjugate, despite extensive carpet bombing. From mid-February up until 21 March 1945, Allied air forces had embarked on a concentrated heavy bombing campaign called 'Interdiction of Northwest Germany'. During this period Allied Bomber Command conducted 1,792 sorties and unleashed 31,635 tons of bombs in an attempt to cauterise the whole Ruhr area.

The next major step for the Allies would be known as Operation Plunder, the umbrella for four other major ground operations and one airborne. Operation TurnscREW would be 30 Corps' Rhine

"IT'S GENERALLY AGREED THAT MONTGOMERY WAS A FASTIDIOUS AND METICULOUS PLANNER WHO RARELY CONSIDERED ANY OFFENSIVE UNLESS THE ODDS WERE DECIDEDLY IN HIS FAVOUR"

crossing at Rees. Operation Widgeon entailed the 1st Commando Brigade's Rhine crossing a little further south at Wesel. Operation Torchlight would see 12 Corps' Rhine crossing at Xanten, while Operation Flashpoint was going to be the US 9th Army's Rhine crossing around Rheinberg on the right flank of the British position. The objective of the airborne element, Operation Varsity, commanded by General Matthew B. Ridgway's 18th Airborne Corps, was to capture Wesel and secure a bridgehead north of the River Lippe and be in effect the last great airborne assault of WWII.

Shortly after the ground forces had navigated the waters of the Rhine the British 6th Airborne Division ('Red Devils'), commanded by Major General Eric L. Bols, and the US 17th Airborne Division ('Thunder

from Heaven') would be landed in quite close proximity to the advancing ground troops not far behind German lines, enabling them to connect with ground forces quickly.

It's generally agreed that Montgomery was a fastidious and meticulous planner who rarely considered any offensive unless the odds were decidedly in his favour, and this time they most definitely were. Many at SHAEF considered him overcautious, and some opinions regarding the field marshal's military acumen were positively hostile.

It's doubtful that Monty would have personally been aware of any dissension, and he was quick to offer opinions on other commanders, a characteristic that didn't always endear him to his contemporaries. Nevertheless, his tactical planning for the current operation had been approved and he would ensure that once his bridgehead was established on the east bank of the Rhine there would be more than adequate resources and men available to hold it against a counterattack. The scale of this operation would make most previous Allied assaults pale by comparison.

An engineering effort

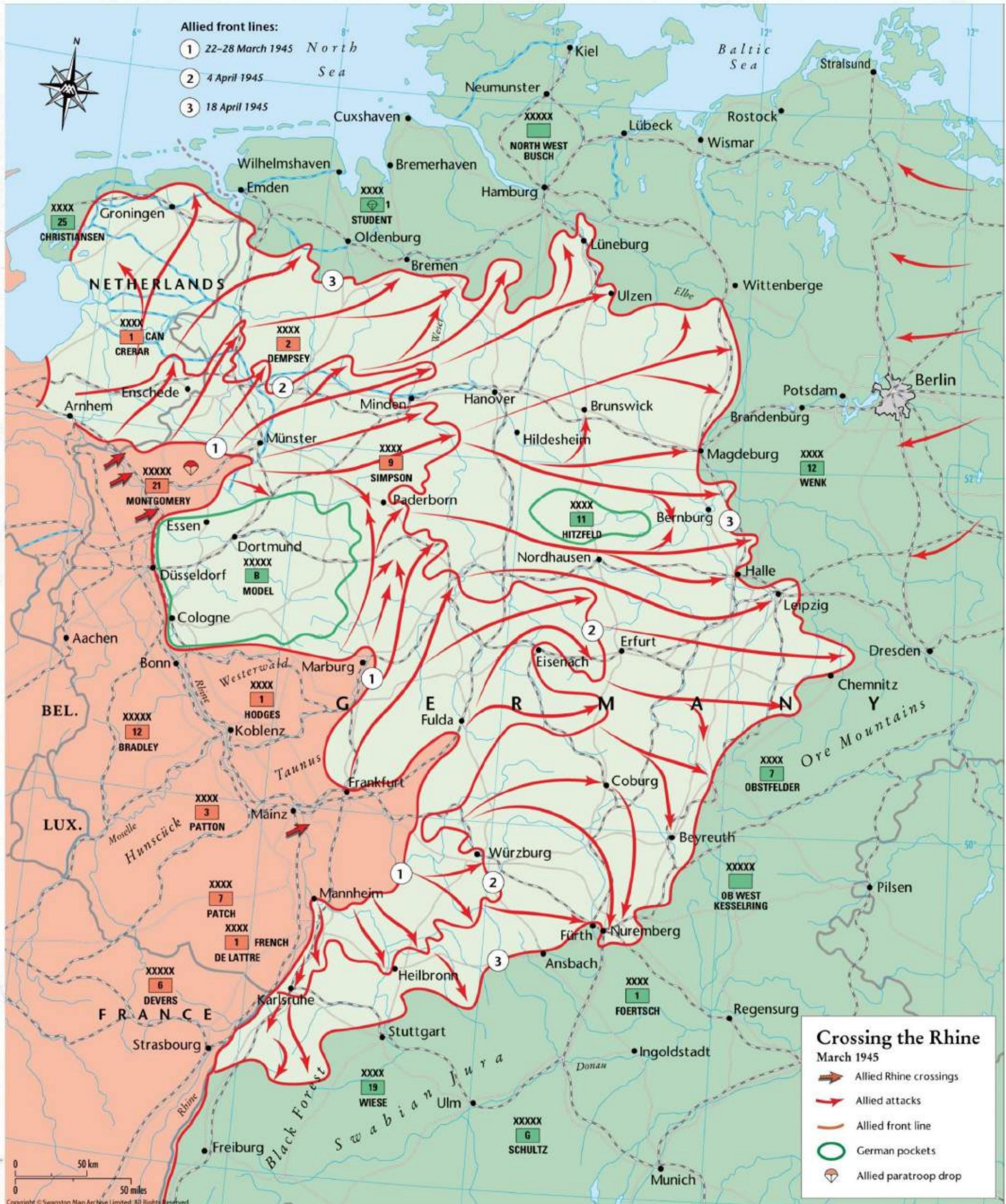
The sheer magnitude of this operation was unparalleled. It would initially entail assembling 59,000 Allied engineers for the transportation of materiel and supplies for Operation Plunder. British 30 Corps commander, the popular 49-year-old Lieutenant General Sir Brian G. Horrocks, renowned for leading from the front, regarded Monty's overall plan for the offensive as 'simplicity itself'.

In preparation for deploying men and materiel for Operation Plunder, engineers and sappers constructed 12 bridges, together with complete railway bridges at Ravenstein and Mook in the Netherlands. Once a railhead and store depot was established near Goch the Allies could begin to assemble the 118,000 tons of supplies

American troops cross the Rhine at St. Goar under enemy fire



OPERATION PLUNDER





Operation Varsity

Alongside the ground forces of Operation Plunder was the largest airborne assault in military history

The morning of 24 March was bright and sunny. Operation Varsity, the subsidiary assault of the historic Rhine crossing, was poised to bring in reinforcements for the Allied troops on the eastern bank. Standing on a hilltop behind Xanten with Field Marshal Alan Brooke, Prime Minister Churchill shouted excitedly, "They're here!" With a great roar overhead appeared 4,000 transport planes, tugs and gliders of Major General Matthew B. Ridgway's XVIII Airborne Corps. In the next ten minutes more than 8,000 paratroopers from the British 6th and US 17th Airborne Divisions were dropped.

The paratroopers were dropped in close enough proximity to Allied ground units to avoid the endurance failures that squandered the British airborne effort during Operation Market Garden. In total, the operation deployed 22,000 paratroopers and glider-borne forces in two and a half hours, comprising two airborne divisions with airdropped artillery packages in support. The leading planes in the first of two waves released their payloads with minimum resistance, but it didn't take long for the German anti-aircraft batteries to respond. Some planes were towing two gliders simultaneously, exceeding normal aircraft capacity and providing an easy target for the German gunners to shoot at.

Ken Plowman was a British Horsa glider pilot who participated in Operation Varsity. He said, "We slowed to around 50 miles an hour and we agreed that we had to land. On the right was a copse and on the left was a German farmhouse. Between the two was a stream, must have been the River Issel. Des, my co-pilot, says, 'Shall we bounce it?' So I pushed the stick forward, bounced on the ground, bounced up with the nose of the glider striking the bank of the stream and it broke off with both of us in it, rolled into the field

doing about 40 or 50 miles an hour until it stopped. Then we hit our release buckles and actually we were upside down so we fell on our heads. We had rolled about 300 yards (274 metres) into the field and as we ran back to the main body of the glider a Jeep emerged from it [and] sitting beside [the driver] is the captain and the sergeant major.

"This had all happened in the time that it had taken for the nose of the glider to roll and for us to get back to the main body of the glider. On the right there was a fellow with a Bren gun already deployed firing away at something, on the left there's another one. Anyone that tells me that in a battle they know where the shooting is coming from has got another thing coming because you can't tell the direction from where all the bullets are coming from. You hear the mêlée, you hear the noise. It's just noise.

"The ramps had been put out, the Jeep comes slowly out, we clamber on, and there are men already on that Jeep and the trailer with tarpaulins. We grab onto this and drive on through the field. About 400 or 500 yards (366 to 457 metres) ahead there's a hedge with a gate. A figure emerged out of the hedge. Fortunately he didn't get shot; he was a chaplain of the Airborne Division who had the rank of general or captain or something. He scrambles on, we carry on down the lane, and just at the end there's a military policeman with his red cap and white cuffs and white belt and he's conducting traffic.

"He puts his hands up and directs us to the left and we go up this road. We stopped eventually and got out and walked in file up this lane. There were people in gardens in slit trenches – they were the Volksturm, the home guard of the German army. They just put their hands up, they were frightened out of their lives. We separated from the captain and went to battalion

headquarters. I was surprised that there were only a few people there. We started to dig trenches around the building.

"About 10.00 a.m. the only drop of supplies was a 'liberator' drop. The squadron of liberators flew at roof-level across the zone dropping canisters with parachutes attached. One flew straight into the ground and blew up a few hundred yards away. A self-propelled German gun had got range somewhere and he was firing shells that were exploding in the air, not hitting the ground. We got into the trenches and a German jet flew overhead. Later on after the supply drop my friend said we could grab a parachute to line the trench with. So we were in our parachute-lined trench and then a few soldiers came through with the pilot of the jet that had been shot down.

"By that time the American element had arrived and set up a prisoner compound in the zone behind us, so they marched the prisoner off to the compound. We got through the night, at about 10.00 a.m. on Sunday morning the first British tank arrived and it was over."

Montgomery had underestimated the ferocity of the German anti-aircraft defences. The paratroopers of the British 6th and US 17th Airborne Divisions found themselves caught in a deadly hail of bullets and almost came off worse for wear. Despite the initial setbacks the two airborne divisions managed to seize the high ground around Wesel and successfully prevented enemy reinforcements from reaching the bridgeheads by gaining control of five bridges over the Issel River to the east of the Rhine. By dusk on the first day airborne troops had secured all of their objectives and linked up with the ground forces. German defenders were routed while Churchill observed the proceedings with great interest.



Source: Wiki / USAF



© Alamy

that were required, including 30,000 tons of engineering, stores, bridging equipment, 25,000 wooden pontoons, 2,000 assault boats, 650 storm boats and 120 river tugs, together with 80 miles of balloon cable and 200 miles of steel wire rope. Allied engineers worked around the clock to construct over a 100 miles of road using 20,000 tons of stones, 20,000 logs and 30,000 pickets, and 446 freight trains hauling 250,000 tons of equipment and supplies to the railheads and forward assembly lines.

To facilitate the logistical requirements, 60,000 Royal Engineers, including navy personnel, were also deployed. Thanks to the rafting and bridging operations that were prepared months in advance, the 21st Army Group could create a detailed but flexible traffic control plan that allowed for the swift and efficient movement of units across the river while simultaneously allowing for flexibility as events transpired accordingly.

The plan may have been 'simplicity itself' but the preparations were orchestrated with sublime professionalism and expertise accumulated on the back of years of experience. There would be no margin for error this time. Monty had learned his lesson well.

All the preparations were conducted behind the veil of a chemically induced smokescreen that was initiated on 16 March and provided by a 'smoke control' unit made of four Pioneer Corps smoke companies. No fewer than 1,350 men operated 8,500 zinc chloride smoke generators that expended around 450,000 gallons of 'fog'. This screen extended a full 66 miles along the west bank of the Rhine. The sole purpose of these dense coiling billows of blue and yellow smoke was to conceal the Allied build up from the Germans on the east bank of the River Rhine.

Preparations for Operation Plunder were conducted under tight security. Strict blackout regulations were enforced for the duration, and a story was contrived to coerce the enemy into thinking that the offensive would hit further north with the purpose of liberating the Netherlands as

opposed to expanding east deeper into the Reich. Troops were forbidden to congregate unless under cover. Massed concentrations of vehicles, weapons and ammunition were expertly camouflaged or concealed in farmyards, barns and haystacks, and rubber dummies of tanks and artillery pieces were positioned along an imaginary battle line where they might attract the attention of enemy patrols.

When Monty got permission from Eisenhower to incorporate General Simpson's 9th Army into his ranks for Operation Plunder, it meant that he would get the services of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops – a United States Army tactical deception unit officially also known as the 'Ghost Army'. Allied artillery guns were well dispersed and augmented by the addition of more than 600 rubber dummies provided by the 23rd.

Air, land and water

During the first three weeks of March, RAF and USAAF heavy and medium bombers dropped 31,635 tons of bombs on the transportation system within the Ruhr. The precursor to the actual Rhine crossing was a massive air bombardment on the German town of Wesel executed by RAF Lancasters and Mosquitos. 8th Air Force bombers and the 9th Tactical Air Command USAAF joined forces to eliminate virtually redundant German airfields, anti-aircraft sites and other positions that had the potential to interfere with the safe navigation of the Rhine.

By 23 March Monty had assembled a force of 250,000 troops along with a formidable collection of armour and specialised vehicles comprising of Churchill, Cromwell, Centaur, Comet, Valentine and Sherman heavy and medium tanks; Bren gun carriers, Jeeps, half-tracks and armoured cars; amphibious Weasel, Buffalo, DUKW cargo and personnel carriers. Allied troops stood with their mouths agape as 15-metre-long, 4.6-metre-wide transporters lumbered past hauling assorted amphibious vehicles. They had been brought overland to the banks of the Rhine through Belgium and the Netherlands.

OPERATION PLUNDER



Source: Wiki / US Army



Source: Wiki / Army Film & Photographic Unit

G Wing of 29th Armoured Division (also known as 'Hobart's Funnies') had been developing amphibious equipment and adapting tactical doctrine for the purpose of executing river crossings. General Hobart's command became the largest division in the British Army, numbering 21,430 men. By January 1945 the British 33rd Armoured Brigade had renounced their Sherman tanks and were retraining with the amphibious Buffalo, officially referred to as the LVT (Landing Vehicle, Tracked). The Staffordshire Yeomanry and 44th Royal Tank Regiment under HQ 4th Armoured Brigade joined the division to retrain.

Monty was in a buoyant mood when he addressed his troops. "The enemy has been driven into a corner. Events are moving rapidly. The complete and decisive defeat of the Germans is certain: there is no possibility of doubt in this matter. 21 Army Group will now cross the Rhine. The enemy thinks he is safe behind this great river obstacle but we will show the enemy that he is far from safe behind it... And having crossed the Rhine, we will crack about in the plains of Northern Germany, chasing the enemy from pillar to post... May the 'Lord Mighty in Battle' give us the victory in this our latest undertaking as He has done in all our battles since we landed in Normandy."

Storming the Reich

During Operation Plunder the River Rhine spanned between 400 and 500 yards (366 and 457 metres), at high tide this could rise to between 700 and 1,200 yards (640 and 1,097 metres). The current was usually about 3.5 knots (four miles per hour). The riverbed was sand and gravel, conducive to using the amphibious Dual-Duplex tanks and trestles that would be able to get good purchase from the surface. The assembled brass, Montgomery, Dempsey and Horrocks, had particular faith in the power and effectiveness of the 25-pounder field gun. The general consensus of opinion was that the 25-pounder, or the Sexton self-propelled version, was one of the most decisive weapons of WWII. For Operation Plunder the British



FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN

had assembled 1,300 artillery pieces and the Americans possessed around 500.

Three field gunner regiments possessing 72 guns each augmented every British infantry division. Their armoured divisions had two gunner regiments, one equipped with 48 self-propelled guns. The 3rd Army Group Royal Artillery (AGRA) had regiments fielding 4.5-inch and 5.5-inch medium guns. The few anti-tank regiments that hadn't been converted into armoured infantry would, along with the anti-aircraft regiments, be equipped with Bofors guns to fire directly and indirectly at the enemy. Masses of supplies, guns and ammunition congregated on the west bank of the Rhine.

British commandos in converted American amphibious LVT-4 amphibious vehicles were going to be the first to navigate the river near Wesel. Under cover of an ensuing air strike the commandos would be followed by the 15th and 51st Scottish Divisions. The British Army had adopted these landing craft and renamed them as the Buffalo Mark IV for Operation Plunder.

British 'Buffaloes' were issued to the 79th Armoured Division in northwest Europe, where they had been instrumental in operations to clear the Scheldt estuary and open the Port of Antwerp to Allied shipping (1944). These were augmented by 11 regiments of 'Hobart's Funnies', Major General Sir Percy Hobart's unique collection of Churchill and Sherman tanks equipped with anti-mine flails, flamethrowers and bridging equipment that had proved invaluable during the Normandy campaign the previous year and the clearing of the inundated Scheldt estuary.



Prime Minister Winston Churchill rides across the Rhine River in an amphibious vehicle

© Getty

On 23 March, at 5.00 p.m., 2,070 artillery pieces erupted simultaneously in an eardrum-splitting cacophony that announced the opening of the Allied artillery barrages. They continued almost uninterrupted until 9.45 a.m. the following morning.

The first crossings were relatively unimpeded during the night, with British 30 Corps navigating the river just to the north of Rees. British 12 Corps crossed opposite the town of Xanten. The British 1st Commando Brigade managed to get across to the partially destroyed town of Wesel, where they faced a house-to-house fight with the German 180th Division among the ruins.

Further south, General Leland S. Hobbs' 30th Division and Major General Ira T. Wyche's 79th Division crossed the Rhine between Wesel and Walsum. By 9.45 a.m. on 24 March 1945 all the units earmarked to cross the river during that first phase had made it safely to the eastern bank and faced little opposition from the German troops positioned there.

King Kenny, Recon platoon, of the 823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion later recalled, "I was attached to the US 30th Infantry Division preparing to cross the Rhine a little further south. I remember when we crossed the Rhine we were to go in boats – not motorboats but boats with paddles. We were lined up on top of a hilly area with the river down in front of us. It was dark, night time. A bunch of guys were next to us and I looked over and saw their faces were blacked-up. They were sharp, a bunch of Canadian commandos.

"We got to the water and they had a boat for us. It was big, and we rowed that thing until we hit land. Turned out there was an island in the middle of the river and it hadn't been plotted for us. We kept paddling the boat and finally pushed across to the other side but met no resistance. We went forward for the next 24 hours and just kept moving. Later, General Simpson wrote a letter commanding the division (he once commanded) for its success in crossing the Rhine."

"AN ATMOSPHERE OF DEFEATISM PERMEATED THE RANKS DURING THIS FINAL STAGE OF THE WAR. THEY KNEW FULL WELL THAT THEY WERE PLAYING THE END GAME"

A procession of German soldiers along the Rhine walking to a prison camp



German resolve was badly shaken by the intensity of Allied artillery fire that ensued after weeks of aerial bombardment and an atmosphere of defeatism permeated the ranks during this final stage of the war. They knew full well that they were playing the end game. Consequently the Germans offered only minimal resistance and the Allies managed to secure extensive bridgeheads all along their front in a relatively short time.

The enemy, however, was quick to recover from the initial shock. As dawn broke on that beautiful spring morning in March 1945, the German high command determined they had accurately deciphered the nature of this Allied offensive and ordered General Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz's 47th Panzerkorps to move to the south with General Major Siegfried von Waldenburg's 116th Panzer Division and Generalleutnant Eberhardt Rodt's 15th Panzergrenadier Division, but it was all to little avail. The Germans had been deceived into believing the Allies would simultaneously orchestrate an airborne operation to coincide with their river crossing.

Operation Plunder may indeed have been a successfully executed military operation that was as inevitable as it was necessary, but the same cannot be said about Operation Varsity. The disproportionate number of casualties that the airborne troops incurred could have been due to the lack of Allied artillery support provided when they were dropped almost literally on top of the enemy positions. This tactic was extremely precarious but it facilitated a rapid linkup of ground forces

with the paratroopers and prevented German reinforcements from infiltrating the bridgeheads. Moreover, the artillery preparation on the far bank was so intense and ultimately effective that at no given time during the operation did the forces crossing the Rhine request massive air support. Monty, it transpired, had learned his lesson from Operation Market Garden regarding dropping paratroopers in proximity to the objective.

He had succeeded in securing these bridgeheads on the east bank of the Rhine. He could again be as magnanimous in victory as he was dismissive in defeat, but the road ahead was far from clear. He had prepared well and committed significant time and effort to the training and rehearsals conducted by units of the 21st Army Group. His plan had depended on maintaining momentum for the duration and ensuring the Allies never lost the initiative throughout. It could be argued that he was over-prepared and over-provisioned for the whole operation, but that was Monty. It's undeniable that his resourceful use of naval amphibious landing craft to navigate the powerful Rhine currents guaranteed that the east bank would be reached safely and with the minimum of disruption. Under the weight of this massive Allied incursion into the Third Reich, German resistance quickly crumbled.

On 27 March, Operation Plunder was officially declared a resounding success, and by 28 March Montgomery had his eyes fixed on Berlin. The only remaining barriers between him and the German capital would prove to be political rather than military, and Monty was no politician.

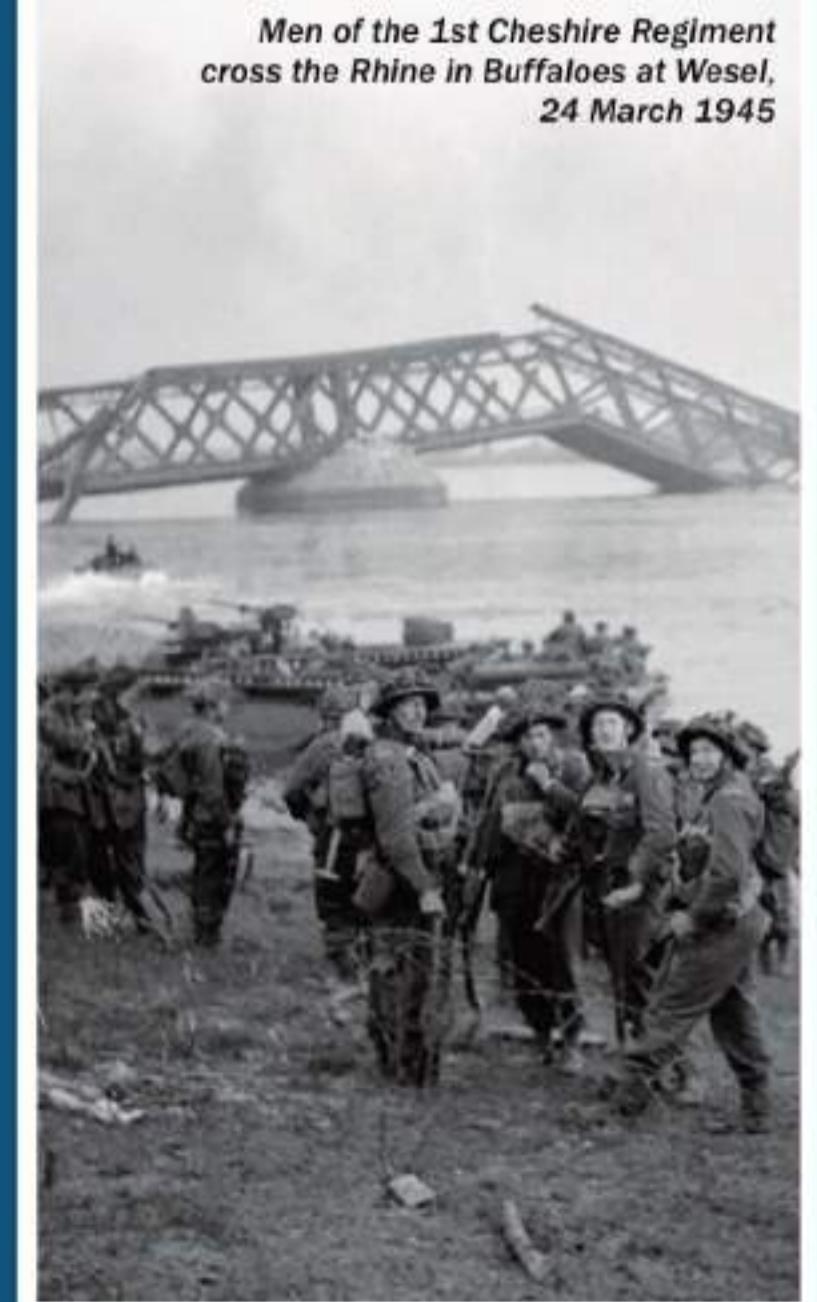
James Albert Newell

Black Watch veteran

"After the Reichswald, we went to the Rhine [River] and we got ready there for the crossing of the Rhine [code-named Operation Plunder]. And on 23 March, again in these same Buffaloes, these tanks, we crossed the Rhine. That was 9.00 a.m., I remember the time on the 23 March. And we immediately went into the attack. We were supposed to attack and take a village. We were told there were not many German soldiers in that area and it should be a pretty easy thing. Well, somebody was very wrong because when we got halfway across an open field the German troops opened fire and we found out later that they were the First German [Parachute Army]. And we were just massacred. I was hit immediately with a bullet in the left thigh and I dropped and fortunately – just pure luck – I dropped into a small, recessed area about a foot deep, like a little ditch. And I think it was used for the running off of water.

"Anyway, I fell into it and I managed to put a first-aid dressing on my thigh and then I laid there. And I lay there all night, and of course, those of my company who had survived just had to go back, leaving everybody there. I was told later that out of our company of 100 men, 60 were killed, 25 were wounded and 15 were unhurt. Now, that's what I was told. And I can believe it because as I lay there, every now and again, I glanced down behind me and there were bodies all over this field. We certainly lost a lot of men."

Men of the 1st Cheshire Regiment cross the Rhine in Buffaloes at Wesel, 24 March 1945



Source: Wiki / British Government

JOURNEYS TO VICTORY

Two British veterans recall how their fighting experiences
led to the memorable end of WWII in Europe

WORDS TOM GARNER

After almost six years of the bloodiest conflict ever fought, the guns fell silent in Europe on 8 May 1945. The continent had been utterly devastated, with countless homes and cities destroyed. Whole countries had been brought to their knees and millions of lives had been lost or irreparably damaged. The intense pain the conflict had inflicted was finally at an end, and the war's conclusion triggered mass celebrations across the world.

Out of the millions who remembered that day were two men who contributed to the Allied victory. Albert Selby and Fred Duffield were both soldiers in the British Army who had fought extensively in Europe from 1944. However, on 8 May 1945 they had very different experiences of VE Day. 75 years on, they recall the battles that led to the war's conclusion, the comrades they lost and the sober recognition that VE Day was not the end of WWII.



Albert Selby after he was medically discharged from the army, 1945



Fred Duffield pictured at Osnabrück, April 1945

British infantrymen station themselves behind a wall during a fight with the German rear-guard in Normandy, June 1944

"SONNY, YOU KNOW THE SHELTER YOU'RE IN? THERE'S A BIG BOMB DOWN THE SIDE OF IT"



"Those left behind"

Albert Selby fought on D-Day and advanced through Western Europe before a serious wound led to him celebrating VE Day at home

During WWII, Birmingham was Britain's third-most-bombed city after London and Liverpool, although the suffering of neighbouring Coventry became better known. From August 1940, 1,852 tons of bombs were dropped on the city, which was an important industrial and manufacturing centre. Over 2,200 people were killed and many thousands more injured, with countless buildings reduced to rubble.

One 'Brummie' who survived the maelstrom was a young worker called Albert Selby, who was soon to pass from one kind of fire into another when he was conscripted into the British Army.

A blitzed city

Born in December 1923, Selby's first experiences of WWII involved trying to survive the Birmingham Blitz with his family. "I was doing war work then and we had 14 hours of bombing at one point. I remember coming up our street when a woman said 'Sonny, you know the shelter you're in? There's a big bomb down the side of it'. We later stayed with an aunt nearby but during that night they bombed the BSA [Birmingham Small Arms Company]. I went straight out of trouble into trouble!"

53 workers from the BSA were killed on that occasion and during the Blitz Selby also had to contend with personal tragedies and incidents.

"My mother died while I was in the army. She had cancer and when there was bombing it was a bit awkward getting her down the shelter. Also, my grandad only had one leg after being in an accident. He was down the pub one time when the sirens sounded but when I got there he was lying in the gutter. He had dived down when he heard the shelling and I thought 'Bloody hell!' before I got him out. That was life then."

After attempting to volunteer for the Royal Navy and serving in the Home Guard from the age of 17, Selby was 'called up' in 1942 after he turned 18. After joining 1st Battalion, Suffolk Regiment, he was sent to Scotland and trained in numerous amphibious exercises. "We did lots of training landings on little islands, but every time I went out I was seasick. I thought afterwards 'Thank God I didn't go in the navy!'"

While the troops were aware they were training for an invasion they didn't know where it might take place. "We all thought we were going to Italy. Everybody had ideas about it because we were training on hills with a Scottish officer. We eventually came down from Dumfries to Havant near Portsmouth and from there we got on barges and liners. The barges were alongside the liners and getting on them was a bit of a pain because you had all this kit and the barge was bouncing around. I realised then that I was going to France."

"Come on, Suffolks!"

1st Battalion was part of the first infantry wave to land on Sword Beach during the Normandy landings on 6 June 1944. Sword was one of the two British beaches and the easternmost location for Operation Overlord.

Stretching five miles along the Normandy coast between the seaside villages of Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer and Ouistreham, Sword was the nearest beach to Caen and responsibility for the initial landings fell to the British 3rd Infantry Division, which included the 1st Suffolks in the 8th Brigade.

Selby recalls the journey across the English Channel and approaching the beach. "We played cards on board the ship. Oddly enough, I wasn't seasick on this occasion, but I probably didn't

Firefighters battle with burning buildings in Birmingham, April 1941





FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN

know what was coming! I looked out about half a mile from the beach and saw one of our ships sink. Whether it was a mine or not I don't know but I couldn't imagine it was anything else."

When the landing vessels approached Sword, the soldiers were exhorted into battle under fire, "I remember the time was early in the morning at about 7.30-8.00 am. There were three lines of soldiers in the boat and running on top was our commanding officer who shouted, 'Come on, Suffolks!' I turned around and one barge behind us got hit. I don't know how many got killed or injured but we were as much concerned about safety as well as getting to the objective and carrying on."

The Suffolks quickly left the beach and Selby soon witnessed casualties as the infantry fought their way through. "We weren't on Sword Beach

for long and went to Ouistreham, which was a little village [at the time]. We were going through it and some of our chaps were already injured or shot. They [the Germans] had been mortaring the village as they went through. I could see one of our lads, a young sergeant, having his wounds dressed, and this was a few minutes after we started to go through the village."

Although the Suffolks took dozens of German prisoners they also incurred fatalities. "Two friends of mine were shot, one [only a couple of feet away]. I was able to man a machine gun and there was a lance corporal shouting 'Charge!' but a few feet from where I was standing a corporal was shot through the throat. I got down quick because I thought I was going to be the next one. I assumed it was a sniper, but luckily for us a tank came down

a few yards from us. They were shouting, 'Come on, Suffolks!' but as I went out two or three more lads were downed. They were some of the best and were really great blokes. That's the kind of day it was."

After the carnage and losses of D-Day the Suffolks had to push inland, although the Allies soon became bogged down in the dense Normandy countryside. At one point the battalion found themselves under enemy artillery fire. "We were in a wood, where you could get lost. The trouble was that it got constantly mortared and the mortars exploded above the trees on everybody below. You could hear them coming and I dived down because I thought I'd got hit. The shrapnel had actually hit my helmet but I dived to the floor anyway."

The Suffolks also participated in the Battle of Caen, a prolonged struggle that lasted into August

British troops follow a Sherman tank towards a Normandy village after the D-Day landings, 6 June 1944



1944 and saw the destruction of the city by Allied air attacks. "We were dug in outside Caen, which we should have taken on D-Day. The commanders decided to bomb it and there were hundreds of American and British bombers. All of the fumes and smoke were coming to where we were sitting and the planes came our way. You even saw some of the aircraft being hit."

By the time the Battle of Normandy ended on 30 August 1944, 22,442 British servicemen had been killed. As a private, Selby believes that his survival during the campaign owed something to his rank. "The officers and NCOs were the ones that got shot because the Germans knew that we followed them. In a way, I was luckier being a lower rank."

Advance through Europe

The Allied breakout from Normandy at the end of August 1944 was a decisive moment and German forces swiftly withdrew across occupied France, with the Allies in relentless pursuit.

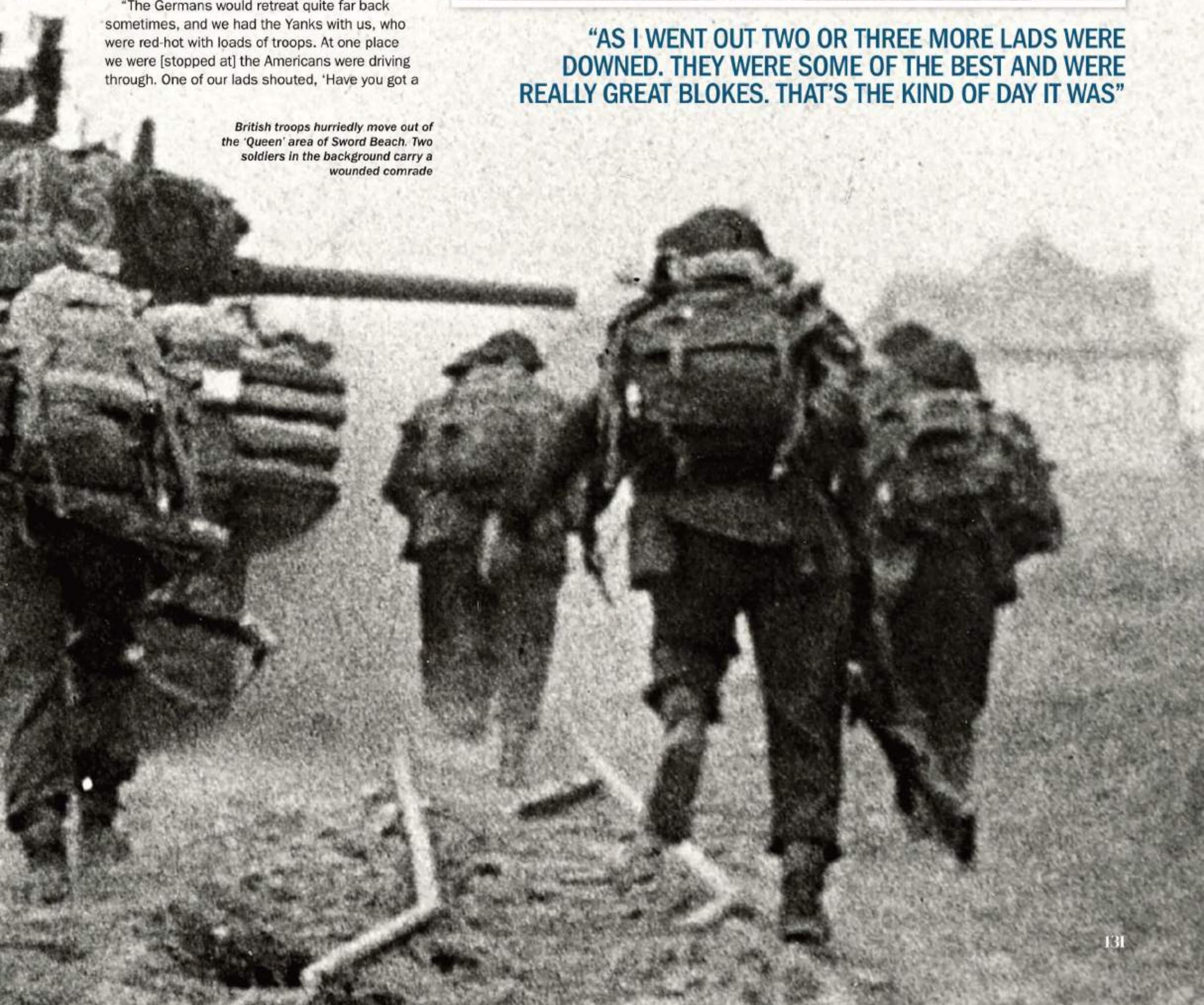
"The Germans would retreat quite far back sometimes, and we had the Yanks with us, who were red-hot with loads of troops. At one place we were [stopped at] the Americans were driving through. One of our lads shouted, 'Have you got a

British troops hurriedly move out of the 'Queen' area of Sword Beach. Two soldiers in the background carry a wounded comrade



Source: Wiki / PD

"AS I WENT OUT TWO OR THREE MORE LADS WERE DOWNED. THEY WERE SOME OF THE BEST AND WERE REALLY GREAT BLOKES. THAT'S THE KIND OF DAY IT WAS"





FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN

cigarette?' and he received a boxfull! Everybody in our lot then had packets of cigarettes."

While he was still in France, Selby had a close shave during a night-time bombardment. "You just went on and on and there were some places where you didn't even know where you were.

"On one particular night the Moon was very bright and the Germans were shooting down from hills because I think they could see most of us in the light. I had to drop down all of a sudden and there was nobody near me. A mortar bomb came down and I thought it was going to hit me. I was right by its side and when it exploded the blast bumped my head. I don't know how I survived."

A frequent occurrence during the advance was the capture of German soldiers, although this was an undertaking often fraught with risk. "I took one prisoner on a night patrol down a narrow lane. There were four of us and I said, 'There's somebody down here.' We were on edge and moved back a little bit before I grabbed a man who turned out to be a German.

"He'd got a red light on him and was probably doing some signalling when he came down the lane. When we took him back a friend of mine from Birmingham almost shot me while he was waiting on guard.

"On another night there were three of us and there was a German stuck in the middle of the road. He couldn't move because he'd only got [the use of] one leg. Me and another chap were crawling backwards while a Jerry was firing above us. We could hear the bullets, although as we got further away he stopped firing. This other chap said, 'We can't leave him [the German] here', and I said, 'Of course not.' We grabbed him by the arms and took him back. I don't know if his wounds were patched up before he was handed over."

As the Allies advanced through France and then Belgium they liberated the local populations, who had been occupied since 1940. However, Selby recalls that they were not always welcomed.

"Some of the younger ladies fancied the Jerries and I suppose it was one of those things after years of occupation. I remember passing one lady and she was staring daggers at me while we were walking through. She had a baby and was probably one of the Germans' girls."

Despite these women's antipathy towards the Allies, their neighbours would inflict a cruel punishment for fraternising with the occupying German forces.

"Whenever a girl had messed about with the Germans they would get a pair of German soldiers'

trousers and pin it on their door. The locals would then get the girls, cut their hair and march them through the town."

"It was a disaster"

After passing through Belgium, the 1st Suffolks advanced into the Netherlands. Despite being in continuous action, the British troops were welcomed by the Dutch.

"Jerry was often about 200 yards away from us in Holland, but I remember two young girls kept running out and giving us bread and bacon. We also took a place in Weert and the local kids were coming up to us and wondering if we would play football with them!

"The Jerries had only just retreated and were more or less still there. However, across the canal there was a nunnery and the nuns came out and sang to us. That was bloody marvellous."

Despite the liberation of the southern part of the country, the Allied progress dramatically stalled during Operation Market Garden in September 1944. Selby remembered the vain attempt of the battalion to relieve trapped British airborne troops.

"We dropped a lot of paratroopers at Arnhem but it was a disaster and we got stuck. The paratroopers were being cut off and the regiment

British infantrymen in the ruins of Caen. A signpost points their way east



Victory in Birmingham

Britain's second city celebrated the end of hostilities with bonhomie, good humour and reflectiveness

The weather in Birmingham was initially wet on 8 May 1945, but it did not dampen the spirits of its citizens. Like much of the rest of the country, bunting was strung out across the streets and party food was hastily assembled from saved-up rations. The hidden supplies included fireworks that were set off in the northern suburb of Kingstanding along with bonfires in Billesley. The street parties were also a carnival of improvised music, with people bringing out wirelesses, gramophones and musical instruments.

In the city centre, Birmingham Cathedral held eight services on VE Day that were attended by 4,000 people, while thousands converged in public areas such as New Street and the Bull Ring. Nearby Bromsgrove Street even put out a cheeky notice, "Please don't call for the rent – we've spent it celebrating victory."

Right: People dancing in central Birmingham. Albert Selby also danced on VE Day, although he jokes that he had "two left feet"

No plans had been made for sound arrangements to listen to Winston Churchill's 3.00 p.m. broadcast in Victoria Square. However, the lord mayor – Alderman W. T. Wiggins-Davies – did his best by opening his council office window and placing his personal radio on the window ledge. He then gamely led the crowd in community singing before loudspeakers were installed for George VI's speech at 9.00 p.m.

After the king's speech, Wiggins-Davies made a statement. "I am proud of Birmingham and its citizens. The city has known many dark and anxious days and thousands have lost their loved ones. We think of them very specially at this moment. Thousands of us still have our loved ones away, many still in danger or as prisoners of war. May God grant us true understanding of this, His supreme gift – the gift of freedom."



"WE DROPPED A LOT OF PARATROOPERS AT ARNHEM BUT IT WAS A DISASTER AND WE GOT STUCK"

went to help them out but we could only go so far. They stopped us at a certain place and we lumbered there before moving on again."

Instead of Arnhem, the Suffolks were dispatched to Nijmegen. The oldest city in the Netherlands, Nijmegen is located in the east close to the German border, and American-led forces had captured the strategically important Waalbrug bridge over the River Waal.

"The Americans had taken the bridge at Nijmegen and all their helmets were on the floor when we got there. The Germans used to come and fire from a distance because they wanted the bridge back. However, we wanted it for our crossing."

Fighting continued in the city, and it was during this time that Selby lost one of his friends, Lance Corporal Reginald Cooksey.

"He was killed by the side of me and there was nothing you could do. He was a likeable guy and had three children. It's who they leave behind that I think about, it's terrible."

Selby was himself seriously wounded during an attack. "I ran into a house for safety but I was hit by a blast and wounded in the right ear." Selby had also been injured on one side of his body and face and was briefly treated in Brussels before being flown to London in a Dakota transport plane. He was then hospitalised nearer home at Dudley Guest Hospital in the West Midlands.

"There were wounded people in there that had every kind of injury. I wanted to know what was going to happen to me and my first thought was about the operation. I spent a few months in hospital and they took me to different specialists. I was then discharged from the army and had the operation afterwards."

"You miss them"

By the end of the war, Selby was working again in Birmingham. Although he had been medically released from military service and seen extensive action throughout Europe, he was mistakenly accosted by an angry civilian.

"A young girl stopped me in the street and called me everything under the sun. I was wearing a 'Discharged' badge on my clothes but she said 'You should be out fighting with the lads!'

"She gave me hell, and I couldn't really explain to her what I was doing. I was annoyed, but what could you do?"

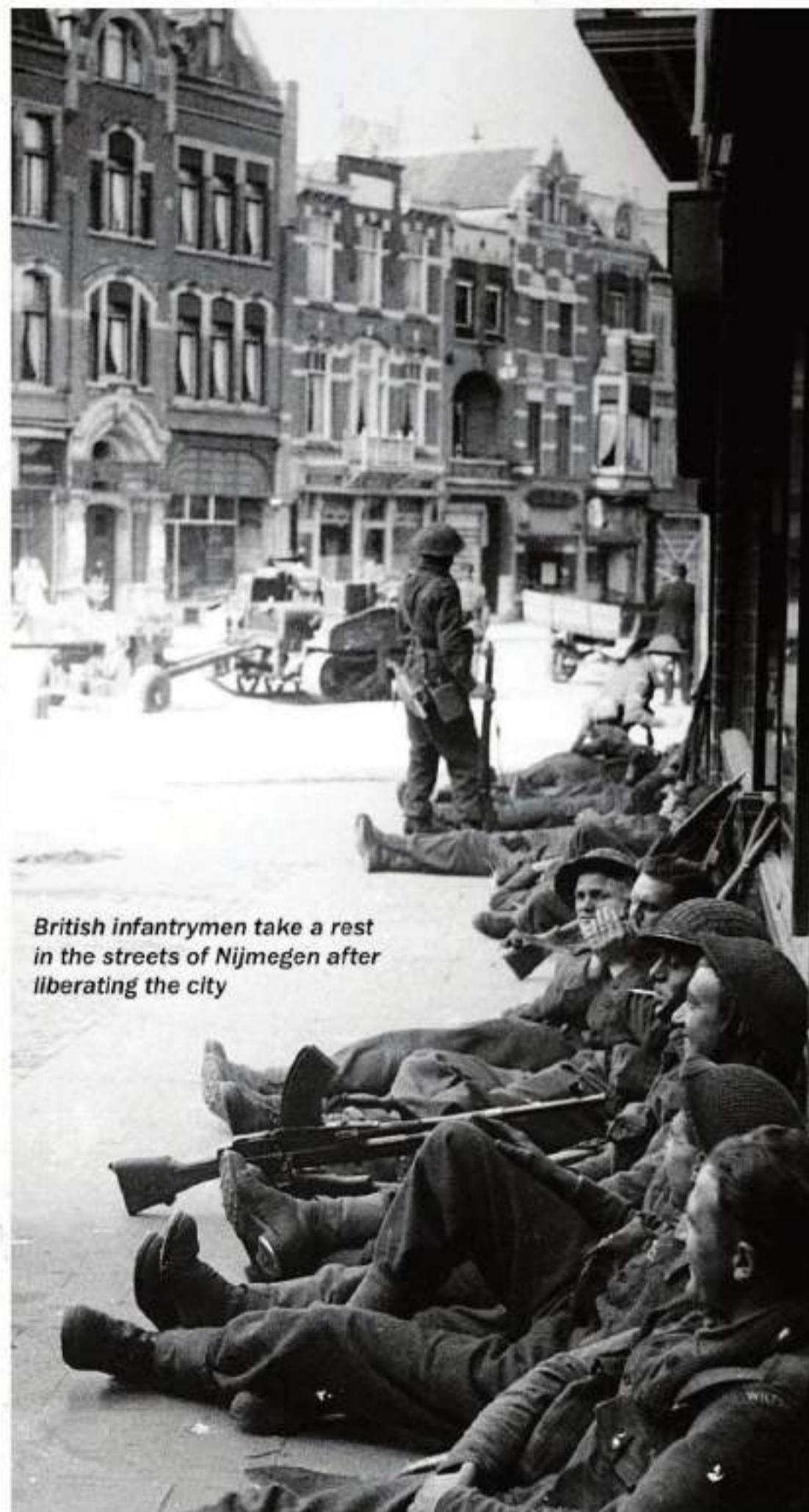
On 8 May 1945, Selby celebrated VE Day in his home area of Balsall Heath. He remembers the jubilation but primarily recalls feeling relieved.

"Everybody was happy and some people were climbing up lampposts. I was dancing myself outside somebody's house, but I'd got two left feet!"

"My main memory I have of VE Day is that I was glad there would be no more bombing during the day or night. People could finally get some sleep because the bombing had been murder. From where I lived in Balsall Heath you could see where every bomb was being dropped in the city centre during the Blitz."

Now the recipient of the Légion d'honneur from the French Government for his role in the liberation of France, Selby hasn't forgotten what the war cost his closest friends.

"I never tried to get the medal and it's hard to put into words really. I was happy to receive it but sad about the soldiers who were left behind. My friends in the regiment were great. You worked with them for years and you miss them. I always think about those they left behind."



British infantrymen take a rest in the streets of Nijmegen after liberating the city



Global celebrations

Festivities began after Germany unconditionally surrendered

On 7 May 1945, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower accepted the unconditional surrender of all German forces at Reims in France. The signed document came into effect the following day, which became known as 'Victory in Europe', or 'VE' Day. Joseph Stalin demanded his own unconditional surrender from the Germans and so another document was signed by Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel in Berlin on 8 May.

While Keitel was completing the final German surrender celebrations erupted across the world. Newspapers went into circulation as soon as possible with special editions that were already printed to relay the long-awaited announcement.

The euphoria was profound in Britain as VE Day was declared a national holiday. Festivities actually began on 7 May with street parties, flags and bonfires appearing across the country. Rationing was partially suspended, with the Ministry of Food ensuring enough supplies and restaurants releasing special 'Victory' menus. Bunting could be bought without ration coupons and commemorative items such as 'VE Day' mugs were produced.

London, which had suffered intense bombing, became a central hub for celebrations. St Paul's Cathedral held ten consecutive peace services on 8 May and massive crowds gathered in the city, including 50,000 people around Piccadilly Circus.



Source: Wiki / PD

Troops in Burma read President Truman's Victory Proclamation



The day was also the zenith of Prime Minister Winston Churchill's career as he made a national radio broadcast in which he cautioned that the war with Japan was not over.

Nevertheless, he gave an impromptu speech from the Ministry of Health's balcony, where he declared to crowds, "This is your victory." King George VI also gave a radio address and he and the royal family made eight appearances on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, including one alongside Churchill.

Across the English Channel, thousands of Parisians gathered in the city centre and happily mingled with Allied servicemen, which led to a polyglot atmosphere. One eyewitness remembered the joyous scenes.

"On the Champs-Élysées they were singing *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, while in the Place de la Concorde and Place de l'Étoile there was hardly any place to breathe."

In the US, 15,000 New York policemen had to be mobilised to control the huge crowds that had gathered in Times Square but celebrations were officially muted. President Harry S. Truman dedicated VE Day to his recently deceased predecessor Franklin D. Roosevelt and flags were flown at half-mast as part of a 30-day mourning period. The mood was also partially sombre in Australia with many Australians still on active service in the Far East. The jubilations in Canada even led to unrest when riots broke out in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Thousands of military personnel broke into closed liquor stores and the ensuing vandalism resulted in several deaths. VE Day continued into 9 May as the USSR marked the event in line with Keitel's surrender the day before. Due to the time difference, New Zealanders had actually been at work on 8 May and so waited to celebrate on the same day as the USSR.

Despite the happiness on VE Day, there was also sadness and grief for those who had lost family and friends and concern for those who were still fighting the Japanese. In May 1945, the war in the Far East was far from over.

"ON THE CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES THEY WERE SINGING IT'S A LONG WAY TO TIPPERARY, WHILE IN THE PLACE DE LA CONCORDE AND PLACE DE L'ÉTOILE THERE WAS HARDLY ANY PLACE TO BREATHE"

Parisians and Allied troops flood the Champs-Élysées on 8 May





“Into the lion’s den”

Fred Duffield parachuted into the Third Reich and advanced across the German countryside before ending the war on the Baltic coast

The Western Allied invasion of Germany began in earnest when the US 12th Army Group crossed the River Rhine on 22 March 1945. Two days later, paratroopers from the British 6th Airborne Division and US 17th Airborne Division launched Operation Varsity – a huge aerial attack to enter northern Germany. Varsity involved almost 17,000 paratroopers and several thousand aircraft. One of those parachuting soldiers was Private Fred Duffield, an 18-year-old medic whose drop into the Third Reich was his first-ever combat jump. For this already battle-hardened teenager, Varsity was just the beginning of over a month’s fighting in Germany that would only end on VE Day.

“Honing a sharp knife”

Born in Staffordshire in April 1926, Duffield was conscripted into the British Army shortly after he turned 18. “I was called up in May 1944 but I was expecting it. I first did my basic training at Shrewsbury before we took different ‘trade’ tests. They told me I could either go in the REME, Service Corps, Royal Engineers or the Medical Corps. I told the officer that I’d like to join the Medical Corps because my father had served in it.”

After joining the Royal Army Medical Corps, Duffield learned the art of treating wounded soldiers in the field.

“I was trained to bandage people up with a ‘shell’ dressing. This was a dressing with disinfectant in a waterproof pouch. All you had to do was rip this off and you had a pad with a bandage that was ready to put the dressing on. We also carried various slings for different wounds as well as morphine, aspirins and Gentian Violet.”

During this time Duffield was given an opportunity to earn more money. “While I was in training two officers came from the Parachute Regiment to give us a lecture. They said if we joined them we’d get two extra shillings a day. That brought my pay up to five shillings a day, which was very good.”

Duffield was sent for paratrooper training at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire and RAF Ringway on the edge of Manchester. “We learned about parachuting but we also had to be fit. I was a soldier but they said that being a paratrooper was like honing a sharp knife. They were putting the finishing touches to us, so we did physical training every hour of every day.”

Jumping out of aircraft came with many risks, including the obvious and unexpected. “During the training I once parachuted upside down and had the rigging lines wrapped around my legs. When I landed some Land Army girls came running down the field and helped me out of my chute, but they then ran off with it!”

Having only been conscripted in the spring of 1944, Duffield was a fully trained medic and paratrooper by the year’s end. He was swiftly attached to the 12th Parachute Battalion and was

eager to put his training to use. “I was proud to be a soldier in the Parachute Regiment, especially as a lad of 18 years of age where I was put in with Normandy veterans. I wanted to do my bit for king and country.”

Battle of the Bulge

The 12th Battalion was deployed to the Ardennes in December 1944 during the maelstrom of the Battle of the Bulge. Notorious for its wintry fighting, Duffield recalls that his baptism of fire was a testing time. “Conditions during the battle were grim. For instance, we were by Dinant and Namur and the troops were up to their knees in snow. At one time we were fighting for this village while it was snowing like hell and two of our lads jumped into a foxhole. They dug to make it deeper but found they’d been standing on a dead German who had been covered in snow.”

While his comrades struggled in freezing conditions, Duffield was billeted at a monastery that had been converted into a hospital. “I was put on the door with a pile of blankets. When the stretcher-bearers came in with a wounded chap I would give them a blanket and a clean stretcher to take away.”

Working in a war hospital during a battle also required performing tragic tasks. “When the stretcher-bearers came in with a dead person a mate and I had to cross the courtyard and put them in the stables of the monastery. Everything was dark because there were no lights or candles, except for what we were using for the hospital. One chap said to me, ‘I’m not straddling over those dead people anymore.’ I had to get a stretcher in with dead people on my own because nobody else wanted to go in.”

To confound the desperate situation, Duffield was also poorly armed. “When we went to the Ardennes I was given a .45 pistol to guard myself, but by the time we did the Rhine crossing I’d already handed it back in. There were not enough pistols to go round so I didn’t get one. I remember being in a village near Namur where we were on one side of the river and the Germans the other. I was guarding an ambulance outside a cinema, but with the Germans just down the road I was only given a pickaxe handle!”

“A German plane came over and Americans along the river opened fire at it. Next door to this cinema was a shop with wine bottles in the window. I said to the lad next to me, ‘If that aircraft comes back again, this pickaxe handle is going through that window and we’re going to have a drink!’ Luckily, the plane didn’t come back.”

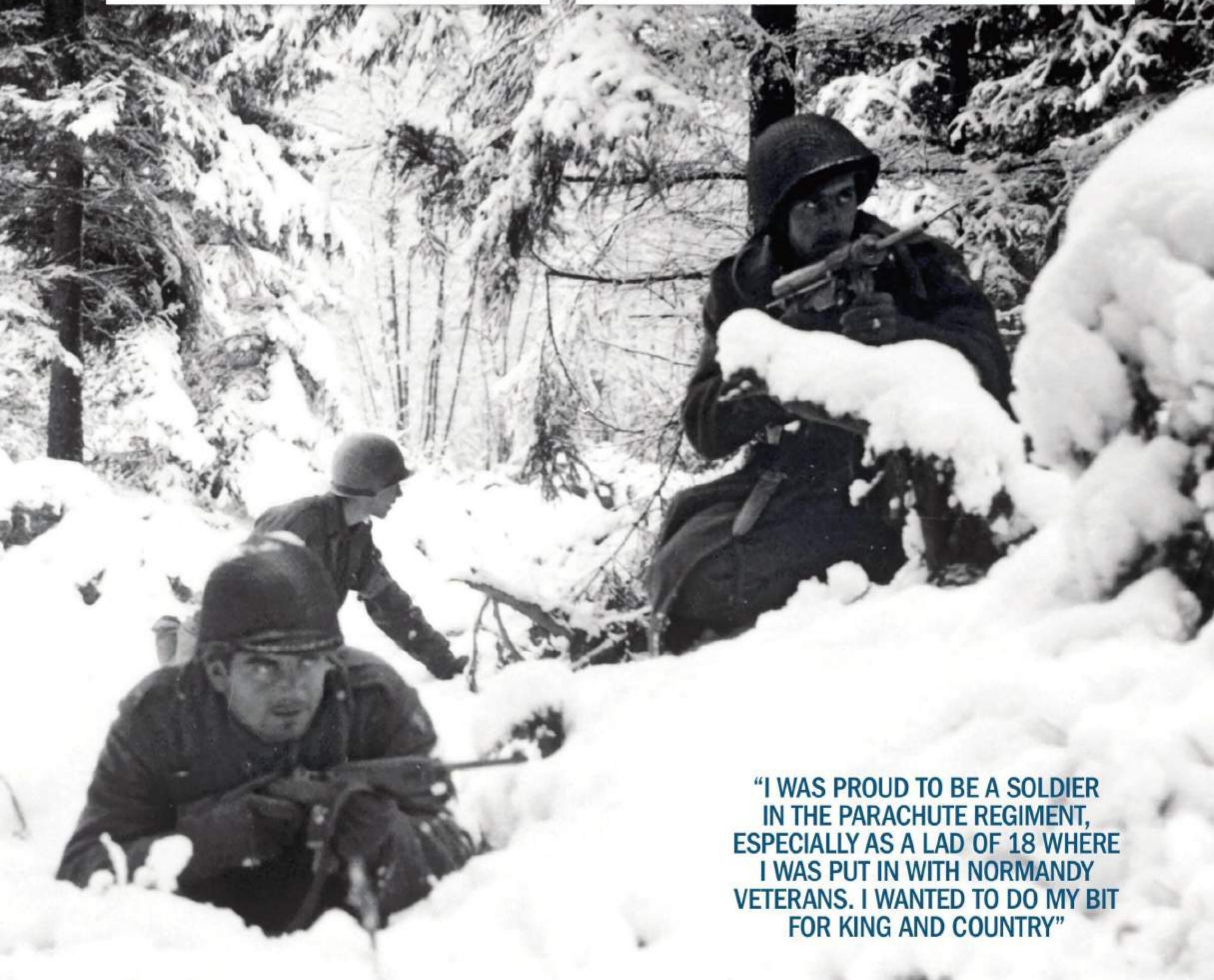
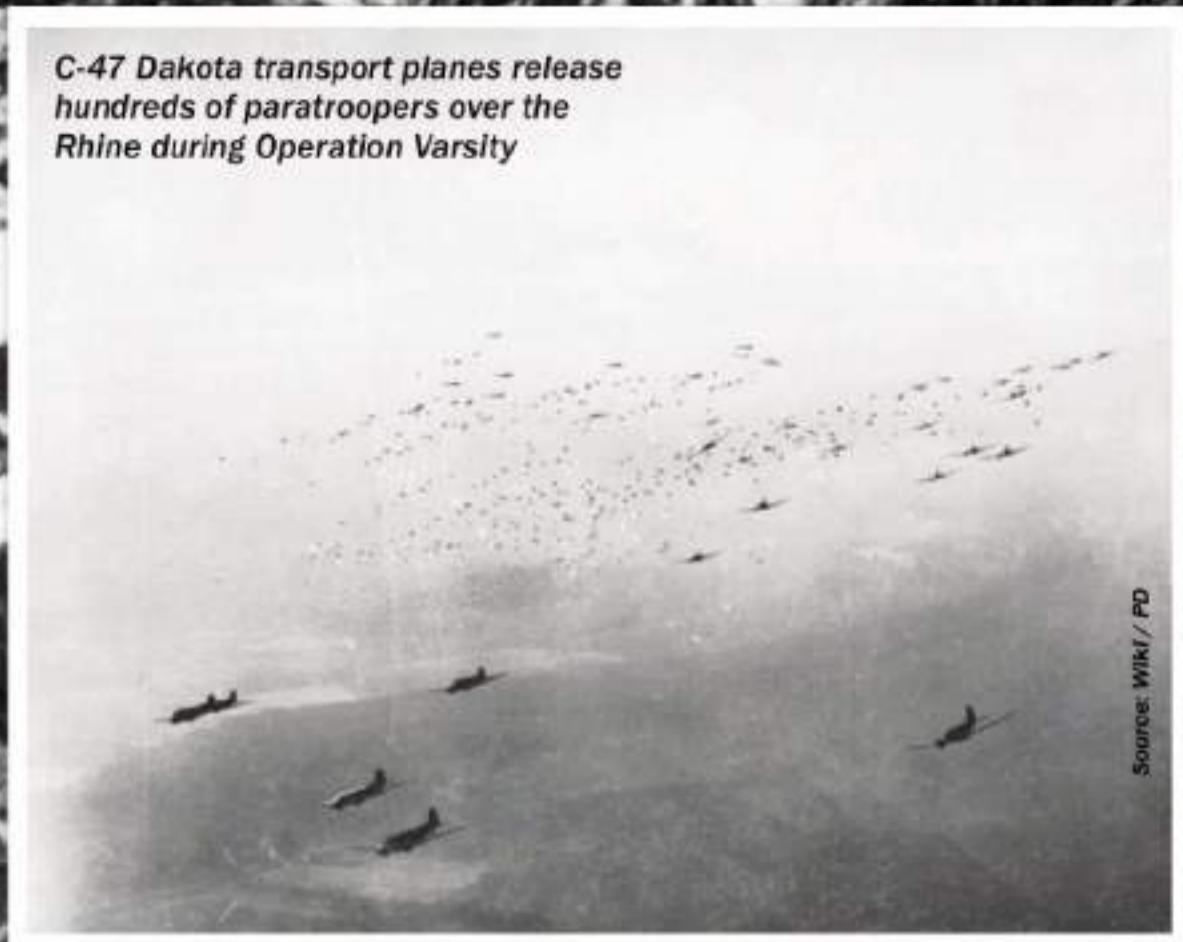
Crossing the Rhine

After the Allies won the Battle of the Bulge in late January 1945 preparations began for the invasion of northern Germany. As part of 6th Airborne Division, 12th Battalion was to participate in

Operation Varsity. Part of the wider Operation Plunder, Varsity was designed to assist the river assaults across the Rhine by landing the paratroopers on the eastern bank near Hamminkeln and Wesel.

The 6th Airborne was tasked with seizing the high ground of Diersfort Wood, which overlooked the Rhine, and capturing Hamminkeln and Schnappenberg. This involved 540 aircraft towing 1,300 gliders into fierce German defensive fire. It was the largest airborne operation in history to be conducted on a single day and in one location. For Duffield – who was still only 18 – the invasion would be the culmination of his training. “It was my first jump in combat and into the lion’s den, although I’ve still got my pants!”

On the morning of 24 March 1945, Duffield flew in a Dakota to the drop zone over Hamminkeln. “We were standing up in the aircraft and the Germans’ anti-aircraft guns were firing at us. You could hear it like rainfall on the Dakota’s fuselage going ‘patter, patter, patter’ with these shells exploding. However, we had to stand up ready to bail out.”



**“I WAS PROUD TO BE A SOLDIER
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Duffield had to quickly adapt to events during the drop and after he landed. "There were four of us in a stretcher party and I was 'Number Four' in the aircraft. Number Three got off the plane because he wanted to go to the toilet but he never came back, so we had to take off with only three of us. Number One got wounded during the drop, so that only left me with this other chap.

"When we landed I was told I couldn't pick anybody up who was wounded during the drop. I was told to get to my rendezvous point as soon as possible, so I ignored the wounded in the drop zone, including a glider that had crashed with perhaps 12-20 men inside. They had tipped over and the men were shouting 'Get me out!' and 'Help, I'm wounded!'"

Duffield pressed on into enemy territory but deviated from his orders to assist some comrades. "When I was approaching my rendezvous I came across three wounded friends. One was Lieutenant Cattel, who I knew very well. The other two were our sergeants and as I was dressing them a farmhouse door opened. A rifle came pointing out and I could

see it through the corner of my eye. I took no notice and carried on because Lieutenant Cattel was unconscious through loss of blood. I injected him with morphine and put a tourniquet and dressing on his leg. I also tended to the other two, who were not so badly wounded."

After treating his friends, Duffield faced the pointing gun. "This rifle came out again with a white flag on the end. Three Germans then came over with their hands in the air. I beckoned to them and tried to explain in German that I wanted to get these wounded men into the farmhouse, which was far safer than being out in the open."

"WHEN WE LANDED I WAS TOLD I COULDN'T PICK UP ANYBODY WHO WAS WOUNDED. I WAS TO GET TO MY RENDEZVOUS POINT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE"

While the new prisoners assisted Duffield, a parachute officer arrived. "I told him what I wanted to do with these men, especially Lieutenant Cattel. He said, 'I'll take care of them now. You get along to your rendezvous and take these direction signs with you.' These were canes with white arrows on top that said 'RAP' [Regimental Aid Post]. This was going to be the farmhouse I had just left but I thought 'I'm not going to wander around trying to get shot at' so I threw it over the nearest hedge and carried on to my rendezvous."

Duffield's experiences upon landing in Germany reflected the initial heavy casualties that 6th Airborne Division suffered that day. However, all their objectives were taken within five and a half hours despite tenacious resistance from German forces. The linkup with ground forces ferrying across the Rhine was achieved and thousands of prisoners were taken. 6th Airborne then took the lead in an advance through Germany.

The 12th Battalion's colonel was pleased to be in the vanguard, although it was the beginning of frequent battles. "He had us all on parade and



said, 'Tonight is the proudest moment in our history because we shall be leading the main part of the British Army into Germany. A Company will take the lead from 23.00 hours before B and C Companies, so you can all share the honours.' I was in B Company and we were struggling along the grass verge because we didn't want to make a noise.

"However, this voice shouted 'Achtung! Halt!' I jumped into this ditch on the side of the road while a German opened up with an automatic rifle. It was like a machine gun firing and I pressed my nose into the dirt. I could hear the bullets whistling past my head and if I had looked up I would have had my head blown off. It was that close – I could hear them whizzing past. To tell you the truth, I said my prayers that night."

During the advance Duffield came under fire from all sides. "We were shot at a lot, although it was infrequent because we weren't in the front line every day. It was the tanks that took the brunt of the battles. We had the Grenadier Guards with us in Churchill tanks, so they took the brunt, followed by the infantry, who tried their best to keep up.

You could go two or three days before you came across some 'grief' from the Germans. At other times we were attacked or bombarded by our own aircraft. That happened to us three times. We had a crescent-coloured neckerchief, and when we were being attacked by a Spitfire we had to wave it and duck. It thought we were Germans because we had advanced so far."

Along the route Duffield saw a devastated country and received a mixed reception from German civilians. "All of Germany had been very heavily bombed or shelled. Some of the Germans were very good, although some weren't. When we took over a village or a house the Germans had to get out, no matter what time of the day it was. We couldn't fraternise with them so we had to drag them out into the street under duress.

"For instance, at Osnabrück it was raining heavily and we banged on the door of this big house. A chap came out in his nightshirt and we dragged him and his wife into the street before we moved in. I snuggled down into his clean sheets while he was out in the wet. I don't know how long they stayed

Source: WIN / PD



Wesel was six miles from Duffield's drop zone at Hamminkeln. A strategic depot, it was heavily bombed between February–March 1945 before Operation Varsity. 97 per cent of the city was destroyed

out there for because they disappeared – they had to. However, at another time we went past a farmyard and there were three farm ladies with churns offering us milk! That was the difference. It really depended on the individual [as to] how we were received."

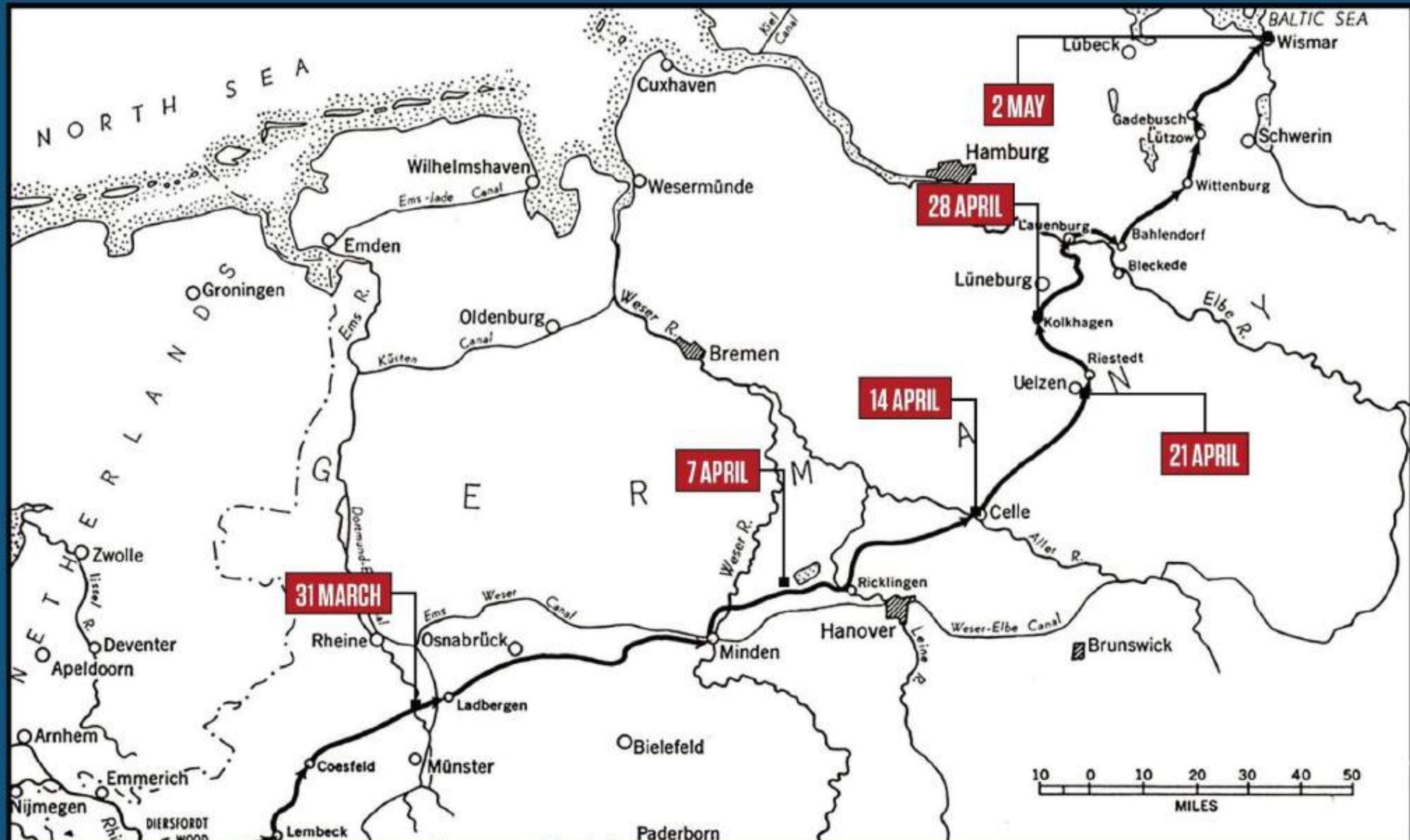
During their progress the paratroopers learned that British forces had liberated Bergen-Belsen

Duffield's progress

Between 24 March and 2 May 1945, Fred Duffield advanced across the width of Germany with 6th Airborne Division via towns, cities, lakes, rivers and ports

Following the success of Operation Varsity, 6th Airborne Division took the lead in a 300-mile advance through Germany. Marching at 11 miles per day, they arrived at the Baltic port of Wismar, with Soviet forces advancing

from the east. Along the way the division had passed through the cities of Osnabrück and Lüneburg, bypassed the large lake at Steinhuder Meer and crossed the rivers Rhine, Ems, Weser and Elbe.





concentration camp on 15 April 1945 and made the local population understand exactly what had been discovered.

"We heard about Belsen when the *Daily Mirror* was issued to us and we pinned the newspaper on the door of a village corner shop. We made any German civilians – man or woman – understand about it by looking at the picture. We could have come across something similar ourselves."

"Burma Looms Ahead"

On 2 May, Duffield's battalion had almost reached the port of Wismar on the Baltic coast. "We were going up to Denmark to keep the peace. However, we couldn't get further than a nearby village because there were so many refugees coming down the road. This village also had 2,000–3,000 prisoners who surrendered to us that night."

Inexplicably, one German officer volunteered his services. "I was looking at some abandoned trucks when a German convoy came down the road with a motorbike and a high-ranking officer in a machine-gun-mounted sidecar. When he saw me they pulled up and I went over. They weren't shooting and this officer told me he was coming to help the British fight the Russians! He was saying 'Boom, boom. Krieg kaput. War is finished' etc. I told him to get on down the road to headquarters, so they carried on."

The 12th Battalion was now responsible for thousands of prisoners. "These 2,000–3,000 German troops were put in the village football field that night. Our colonel mounted a machine gun on one of the posts and issued a command to the gunner: 'If anyone tries anything during the night I've got orders to open up and you will all be killed.' They were still there next morning when I went to disarm them. We were sorting to see if they had any revolvers or daggers. I had to remove everything, including dinner knives. One chap came with photographs and kept saying 'Mein frau'. This meant his wife, so I allowed him to keep those."

Days later, the war in Europe ended and Duffield was in Wismar for VE Day. The paratroopers had to improvise their celebrations. "Wismar was dry and there were no drinks there, so our colonel said we'd have a gymkhana instead. The German transport used a lot of horses, so there were horses everywhere. Some of our lads rode bareback on these horses and we had races. A two-seater spotter plane landed and a sergeant came out

dressed as a bookie with a big leather case. He had handfuls of German money, which was of no value, and threw these notes about saying 'Make a bet!'"

The celebrations descended into a fiery farce. "We were going to have a big bonfire and there was a German train loaded with timber. Our lads piled it up and it was soaked in petrol so that it would burn well. Our colonel was a rider and that night he came down on a white horse with a flaming torch to throw on this bonfire. It went up with a 'WHOOOMPH' and the horse bolted up the field! We had quite a party."

Despite the euphoric atmosphere, Duffield and his comrades were sharply reminded that the war was not actually over. "VE Day was not a surprise but it was a great relief not to be shot at anymore. We could get back to normal, or so we thought. This was because our colonel soon had us all on parade. He said, 'Do you know what 'BLA' means? You think it stands for 'British Liberation Army' but you're wrong – we're going home.' We all cheered, but he then said, 'We're going home but we're then going to Burma.' That's what BLA stood for – Burma Looms Ahead – and that's what we did. It was an anti-climax."

"Ever Grateful"

After a period of leave the battalion was deployed to India before they conducted a raid on the Malayan coast to search for Japanese troops. VJ (Victory Over Japan) Day saved Duffield from experiencing combat in the Far East, and he was among the first British troops to re-enter Singapore. He remained in the British Army until he was demobbed in 1947 with the rank of corporal.

Now a recipient of the Légion d'honneur, Duffield is pleased to have received the award. "I was very proud because it wasn't just for me but my comrades who didn't come back. It's supposed to be for Normandy veterans but I got it for doing the Ardennes and the Rhine crossing. Nobody was more surprised than me when I got it in the post! I had a ceremony afterwards after the Parachute Regiment found out. They made quite a fuss; the regimental band was there and the French attaché came and presented it to three of us."

Nevertheless, despite the recognition from the French Government, Duffield is perhaps most proud of one life he saved. "I eventually found out what happened to Lieutenant Cattel. The paratroopers have a magazine called *Pegasus*, and in one issue was a letter from a chap who wanted to know if I knew his father, who was the lieutenant's batman. When I phoned him he said, 'Lieutenant Cattel has also rang'. I said 'Hell, is he alive?!" He said, 'Oh yes, very much so but he lost his leg.'

"I told him my tale and he rang the lieutenant to say that he'd found me. Lieutenant Cattel said, 'I've been looking for you for the last 20 years!' I went to see him and every Christmas after that he sent my wife 24 carnations. He was so pleased that every bouquet came with a note that said 'Ever Grateful'. He died a few years ago and left me thousands of pounds in his will. The words again said 'Ever Grateful' and the carnations still come every Christmas. I'm very proud."

"THE WORDS AGAIN SAID 'EVER GRATEFUL' AND THE CARNATIONS STILL COME EVERY CHRISTMAS. I'M VERY PROUD"



British paratroopers walk through Hamminkeln after the successful completion of Operation Varsity, 25 March 1945





*British and Soviet troops
greet each other at
Wismar, May 1945*

*Led by their
officers, German
POWs trudge into
American captivity
near Munich.
4 May 1945*



**"HE FETCHED TWO GLASSES
AND IN RUSSIAN STYLE
FILLED THEM TO THE BRIM
WITH VODKA SO THAT WE
COULD TOAST EACH OTHER"**

© Getty

DEMOBILISING THE WEHRMACHT

With Europe in ruins but Nazi Germany defeated, what happened to the millions of Wehrmacht personnel as hostilities ceased and the shooting stopped?

I climbed up the cellar steps, opened the front door and stepped out onto the street... with a dirty white towel tied to a broomstick... the first of the Americans, a little guy, tore off all my medals which made gaping holes in my tunic... I wondered what would happen to me." Henry Metelmann, a Panzer crewman with 22nd Panzer Division wasn't alone in pondering his fate as he went into captivity at the end of the war. The months leading up to the Nazi capitulation had seen mass surrender in the West in particular, with an average of 50,000 German troops a day throwing in the towel in April. A million more gave up in Italy and Austria on 2 May, and two days later another million joined them in accepting imprisonment across northwestern Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands.

A senior Danish police official in the town of Odder, Assistant Commissioner Lemvigh-Müller, found himself in charge of disarming the local German forces. "At a meeting, on the fourth evening after the announcement over the radio of the German surrender in Denmark, the local

representatives of the liberation movement and I discussed... the detention and disarming of German forces in Odder. At midnight we were received by the German commander, Major Erdmann, at the Phoenix. The garrison at that time consisted of about 1,000 men. Major Erdmann told us that he had received no orders and that the radio announcement was probably an English lie... he declared that if the British or the Americans approached, he would march out of town... but if the Russians came the city would be levelled. On 7 May the commandant came to see me and informed me that his men would depart the next morning. Handguns with five shots per man were left with them, all other equipment was taken over by the Resistance."

Disarmament

Under the command of their own officers for the most part, the mass of German soldiery destroyed what was left of their heavy equipment, spiking artillery guns, blowing up Panzers and disabling aircraft. The favoured tactic for the latter was to

remove the propeller or collapse the undercarriage. Machine guns and rifles were piled up and left, as Norwegian SS volunteer Ivar Corneliusen remembered. "We were in Austria when the war ended, in a small village... an officer came and told us the war was over. We collected all our weapons into a big heap and our officers told us that from this point on we were relieved of our oath."

As a last show of defiance against the failed Reich many simply dumped their weapons, as Gefreiter Robert Vogt, of 352nd Infanterie Division, recalled. "It was pointless. We were gambling with our lives for a lost cause... the war was lost. So we threw our weapons into a stream."

Personal papers and possessions were also destroyed or buried in the hope of returning later to retrieve them. Those that kept medals, watches and so on soon found themselves relieved of them upon surrendering, just like Metelmann. Hendrik Verton, a Dutch SS volunteer fighting in Breslau, was one of them. "A Russian soldier tottered down the cellar steps... he was a little man, short and stocky... he grasped me to his breast... kissed me



Teenaged Hitler Youth and elderly Volkssturm are rounded up in Berlin by the Red Army. Their fate was probably Siberia and the gulags

© Alamy



Foreign SS: retribution

For the non-German members of the Waffen-SS, VE Day signalled an end to the war but a beginning to their punishment

Jan Munk, a 23-year-old Dutch SS volunteer, had tried to walk back to Leiden at war's end but was recognised a few miles from home and thrown into a prison cell. "I cried my eyes out ... that night I heard one of the cells being opened and the occupant taken out. After the guards had their fun with him they returned him to his cell and then it was my turn... I was beaten up with fists and sticks. This went on for three nights. Waiting for your turn was the worst part."

Tried and convicted, Munk was sentenced to five years hard labour. A Flemish SS man, Dries Coolens, suffered much the same treatment.

"Back in Belgium I stepped off the train in Ghent and was recognised straightaway. A mob attacked me and almost beat me to death. The next thing I knew I woke up in hospital. I was convicted of taking up arms against Belgium and sentenced to death and then had my sentence commuted to 15 years in prison."

Coolens' fellow Fleming Albert Olbrechts was far luckier. "We took off our uniforms and put on some civilian clothes we had stolen. We decided to hide in a barn that night and surrender the next morning... when I woke up the Americans had arrived. A Black American sergeant was shouting at us to get out of the hay and put our hands up. He took me to an officer, and I told him I had been taken from Belgium to come and work in Germany, and he said 'OK' and directed me to a refugee centre." Olbrechts never went home, settling in West Germany instead. His compatriot Oswald Van Ooteghem also saw staying away from home as his best option.

"When the war ended I thought of committing suicide... instead I called myself Hans Richter, pretended I was German, and married a German woman." Van Ooteghem would eventually serve three years, sharing a Belgian cell with his father, a renowned nationalist leader.



Jan Munk served in 5th SS Panzer Division Wiking on the Eastern Front and was imprisoned in the Netherlands after the war

Below: SS man Oswald Van Ooteghem, "I had photos taken in Army uniform to fool any checks; the shoulder boards and collar tabs were made of paper and stuck on"



Some of the 180,000 German POWs sent to France as forced labour clear rubble in Dunkirk in July 1945

on both cheeks, declaring 'Hitler kaput!'. He stole my watch, adding them to those already decorating his arms up to his elbows... and with a heavy heart I burned my Soldbuch with all the entries of my military service in it."

Those who didn't immediately go into captivity shared out any food, blankets and spare clothing they had and then either split up to try and head home or formed into columns to surrender en masse. Some, like Bruno Friesen, a gunner in 7th Panzer Division, managed to melt back into the population. "I never surrendered, I was never a POW, I never attended denazification lectures. I just went back to my life."

One thing Friesen, Metelmann and Vogt had in common was that they were glad it was over and they had survived, but the same could not be said for German troops in the East. There, fear of their fate drove millions of soldiers and civilians alike to head west in an attempt to surrender to the Western Allies and not the Red Army.

Surrender in the East

In the end some 800,000 Wehrmacht soldiers fell into Soviet hands at the end of the war to join two million of their comrades captured earlier on. One of those facing this fate was Günter Korschorek. "Russia means nothing less than imprisonment in Siberia. A terrible word, it hammers away inside my head! We who have fought against the Soviets can imagine what awaits us in Siberia." Transferred west, Korschorek was lucky and lived.

According to the Soviets' own admission some 381,067 Wehrmacht POWs died in the gulags,

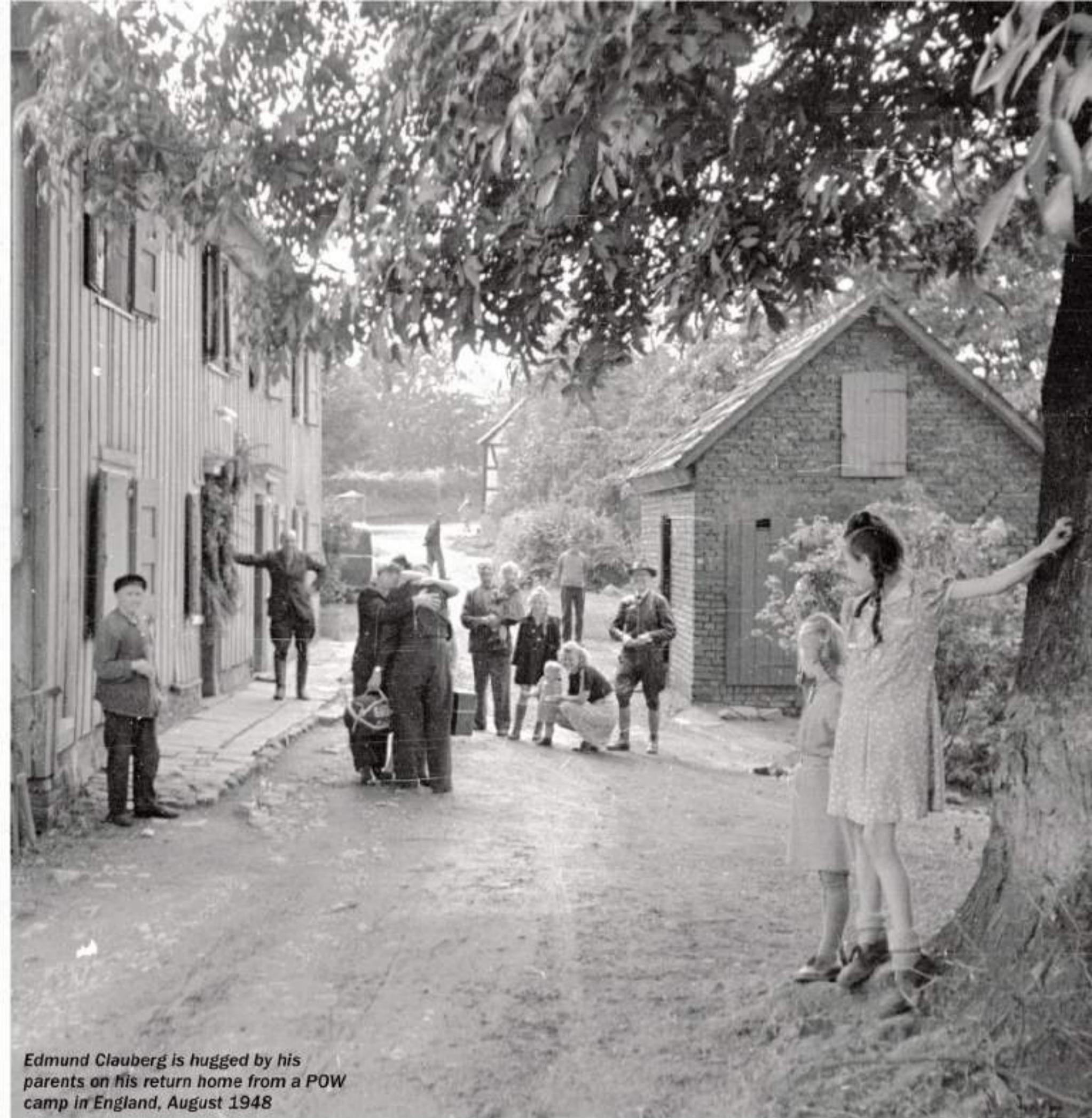
although this is considered a huge underestimate, with the true figure thought to be as many as 1 million deaths from shooting, maltreatment, disease and starvation. However, not all German POWs falling into Soviet hands were treated badly. The highly decorated Panzer veteran Oberst Hans von Luck remembered what happened to him when a Soviet soldier tried to steal his watch and Knight's Cross.

"A young officer suddenly intervened. 'Stop! Don't touch him, he's a geroi [Russian for hero], a man to respect.'" Von Luck was then taken before a Red Army colonel. "He fetched two glasses and in Russian style filled them to the brim with vodka so that we could toast each other." A Luftwaffe fighter pilot had a similar experience on surrendering when marched in front of a group of Red Army officers.

"The general stood up, put on his cap, gave an order to the other officers and they all raised their hands to me in military salute."

In the West – the Rheinwiesenlager

From D-Day onwards, the Americans and Anglo-Canadians were roughly capturing the same number of prisoners each and processing them through removal by stages back to camps in Britain or North America. Treatment was usually fair – although looting was rampant, as the Luftwaffe pilot Norbert Hannig found out after surrendering to a young Canadian officer. "May I have your pistol please, and the holster as well – as a souvenir you understand." He was then fed a plate of steak and mashed potatoes before being handed over to the



Edmund Clauberg is hugged by his parents on his return home from a POW camp in England, August 1948

Americans. This was common practice at the war's end as the sheer numbers of new prisoners were so great the British and Canadians stopped taking in their full share, leaving their American allies with the unenviable task of housing, feeding and guarding millions of former servicemen and women.

The American solution were the 19 Rheinwiesenlager – the Rhine meadow camps – built in occupied western Germany as temporary holding and processing stations. Officially termed Prisoner of War Temporary Enclosures (PWTEs for short), they would end up holding as many as 2 million POWs throughout the summer in often extremely poor conditions. Each camp was built to the same design; open farmland was chosen, conveniently close to a railway line, and enclosed by barbed wire.

The total camp area was sub-divided into ten to 12 smaller zones, each housing 5,000 to 10,000 men. Nearby farm buildings were used as the camp kitchen, hospital and administrative centres, and it was down to the prisoners themselves to provide doctors, cooks and work parties. Security was furnished mainly by former Wehrmacht field police who were given extra rations to man the wire. No accommodation was provided for POWs, forcing them to dig crude shelters and caves in the earth in which to sleep and shelter from the elements. Ivar Cornelussen witnessed the makeshift nature of the camps.

"The Americans put us all into a POW camp, not that it was a proper camp, it was a big field with some barbed wire, and there was very little supervision, not many guards at all."

The flood of prisoners soon overwhelmed the camps. Camp Remagen, for instance, was built for 100,000 POWs but held 184,000. With no shelter, and rations set at 1,200–1,500 calories per day per man – even though this often wasn't met – malnutrition and disease soon set in and prisoners began to die. Unlike in Nazi camps this wasn't official policy but rather the unfortunate result of a system struggling to cope. To shield themselves from accusations of mistreatment, Dwight Eisenhower decreed that the men in the camps weren't officially prisoners of war but were instead 'disarmed enemy forces', meaning they weren't covered under the Geneva Conventions. Regardless of the legal niceties, by the Allies' own admission between 3,000 and 6,000 prisoners died in the camps, although the true figure was probably quite a lot higher.

Processing and release

Screening of prisoners began immediately to ascertain their rank, branch of service and any involvement in war crimes. Officers were subject to lengthy and repeated interrogations, and members of the Waffen-SS were also singled out for special treatment, as Andreas Fleischer saw in his camp.

"One day an American officer with a loudspeaker appeared and called out to us, 'All Wehrmacht men go over there to the left, and all Waffen-SS men to the right.' We all went where we were told, and it turned out there were more than 200 of us Waffen-SS – that shocked them, especially as the camp had a rule that the guard had to be doubled if there was even just one Waffen-SS man in it.

American soldiers would then come up and stare at us through the wire like we were animals in a zoo."

Leo Wilm described what Waffen-SS membership could mean in the West. "During an interrogation by the Americans I was given a beating because I had been assigned to anti-partisan duties." Harsh though this was, it was far worse in the East, as one SS man described.

"Most of the division was handed over by the Americans to the Russians and sent to the gulags. I had a friend who was with them... he once saw a Russian tank shoot down 500 SS men because they couldn't work anymore; that was the rule, if you couldn't work you were shot."

Another retold, "In one of the many camps I went through I saw two men walking in step with one another. The Russian guards immediately grabbed them and checked for the blood group tattoo all Waffen-SS men had. They found it and shot them on the spot."

Despite these cruelties in both east and west, prisoners began to be released within a few weeks of the end of the war. Female personnel and teenaged Hitler Youth were usually the first, swiftly followed by those deemed necessary to help rebuilding – farmers and miners being top of the list. Following French demands, over 180,000 POWs were sent to France as forced labour, but by the end of June 1945 several of the Rheinwiesenlager, including Remagen, were closed down. As for the east, by the end of 1946 the Soviet Union held fewer POWs than Britain, the United States and France combined, but it didn't release the last of them until 1956.

WESTERN FRONT BY NUMBERS

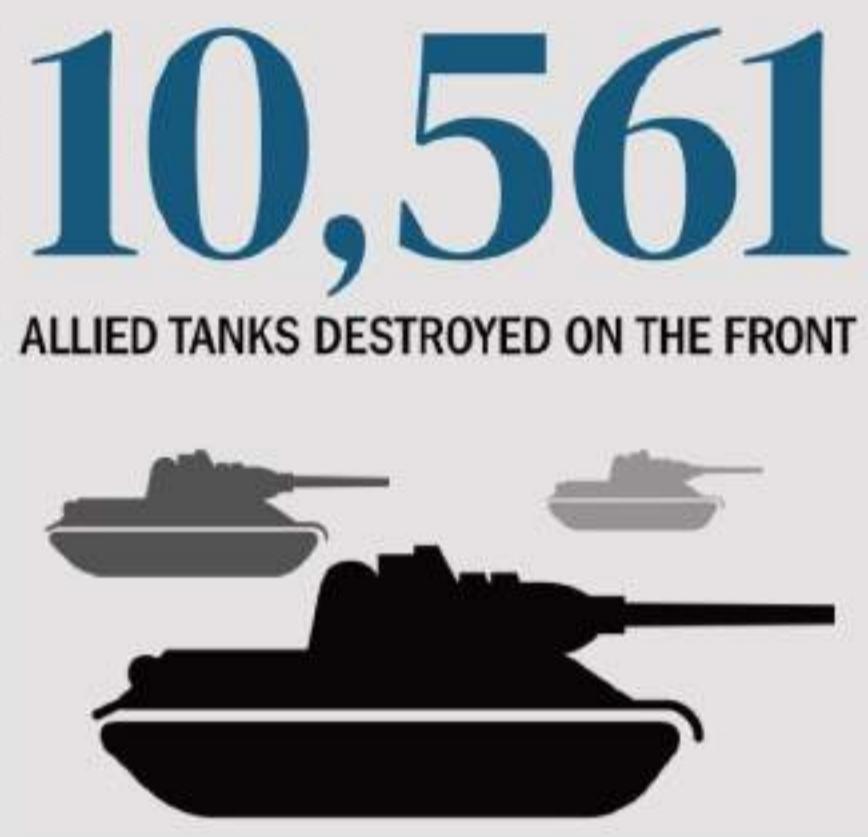
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Skull icon: Ruedi Luthi; Flag: Thanga Vignesh



Tanks: Evgeniy Kozachenko



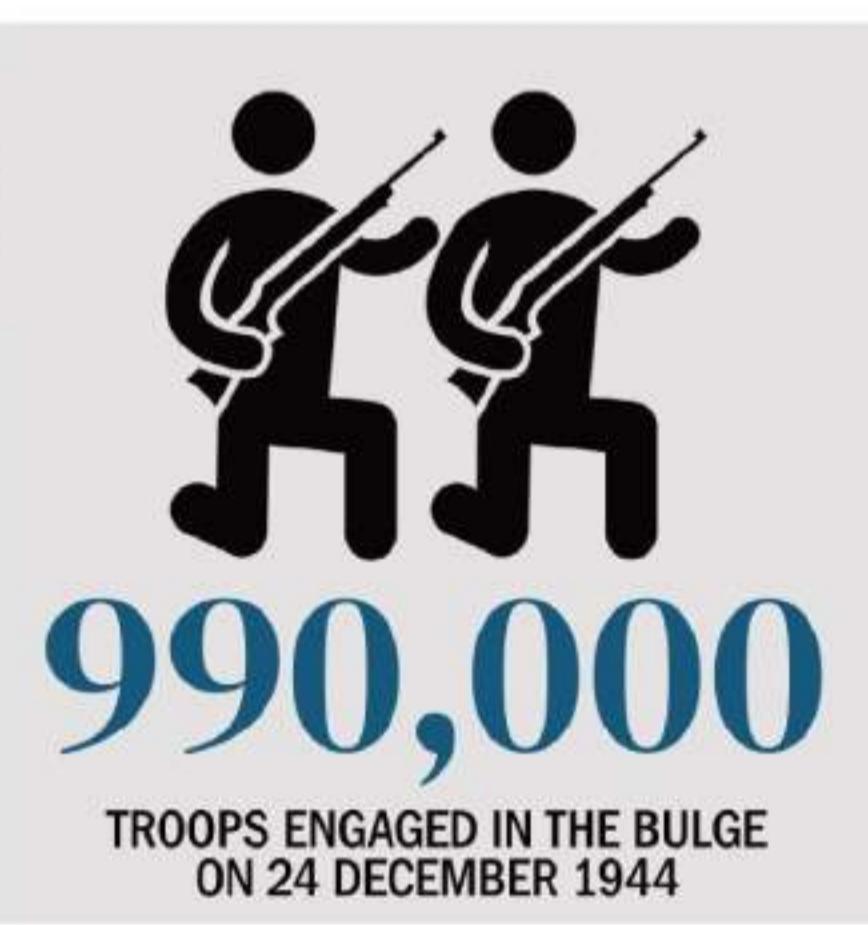
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Ammo: Ronin design



Soldiers: ProSymbols



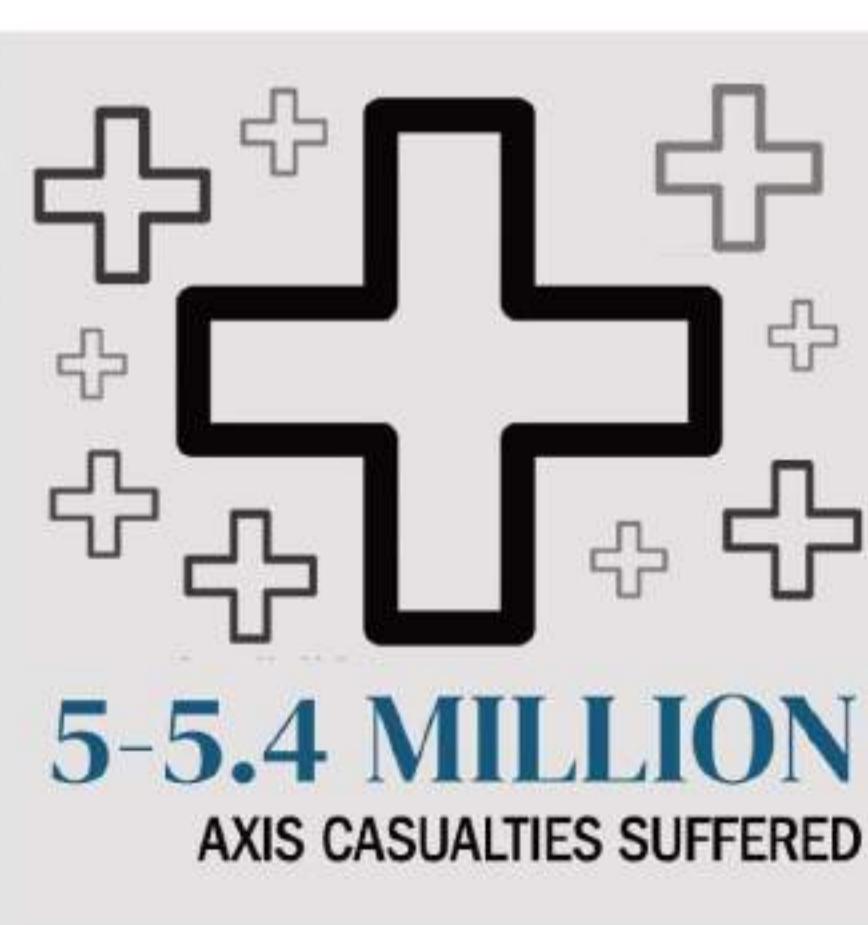
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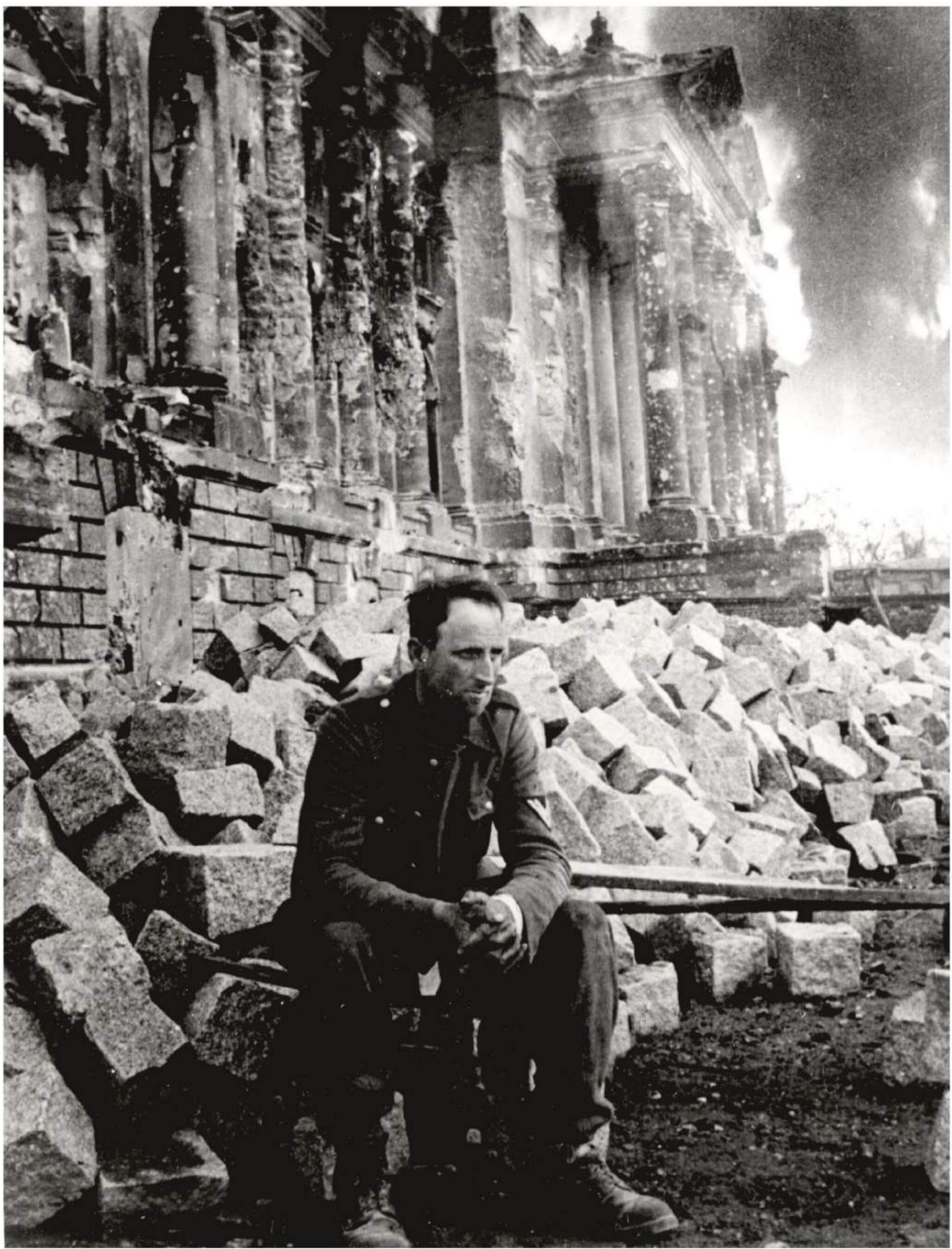
Magnifying glass: Haykam

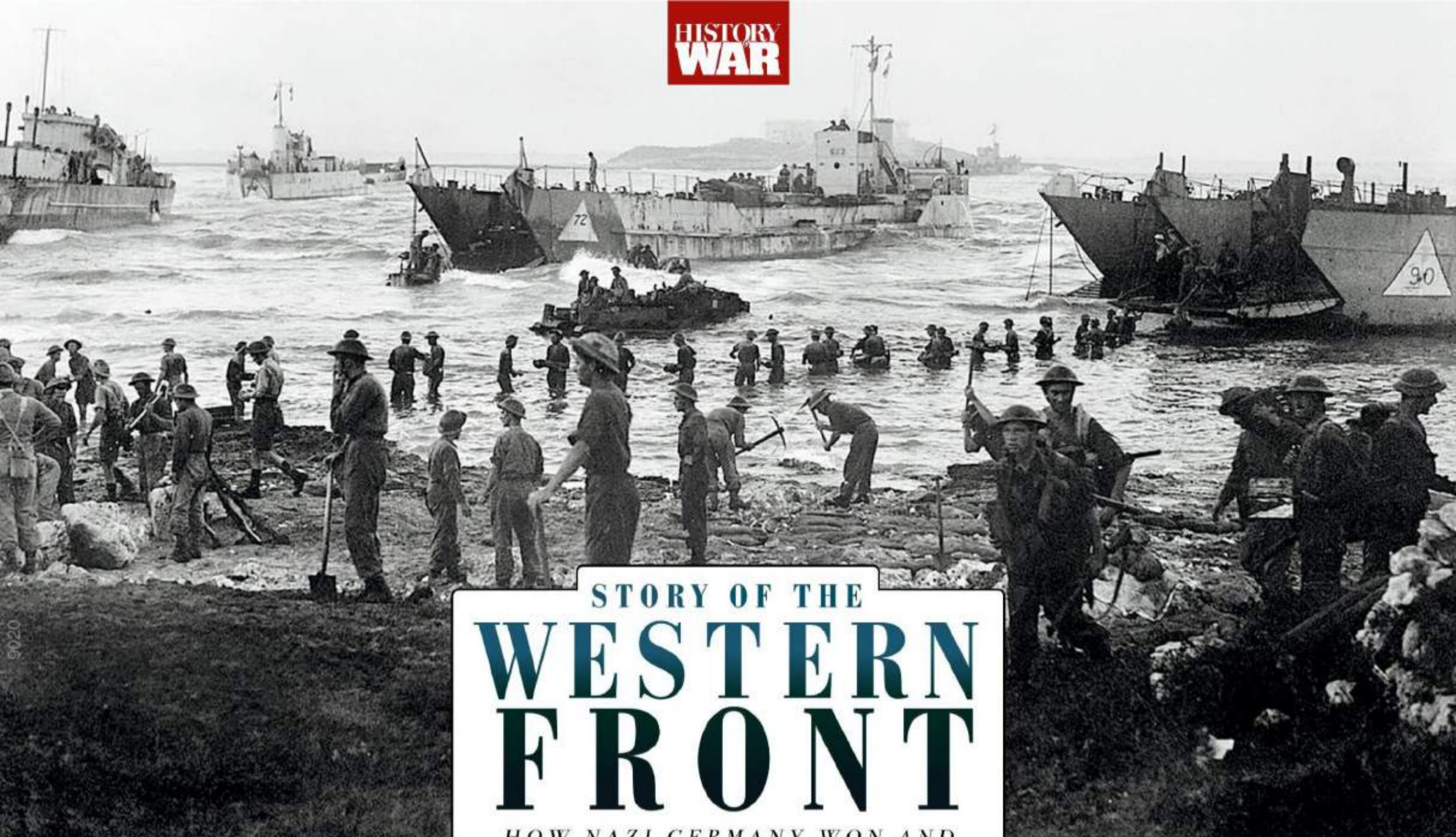


Medical cross: Mello



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STORY OF THE WESTERN FRONT

HOW NAZI GERMANY WON AND
LOST THE WAR IN THE WEST



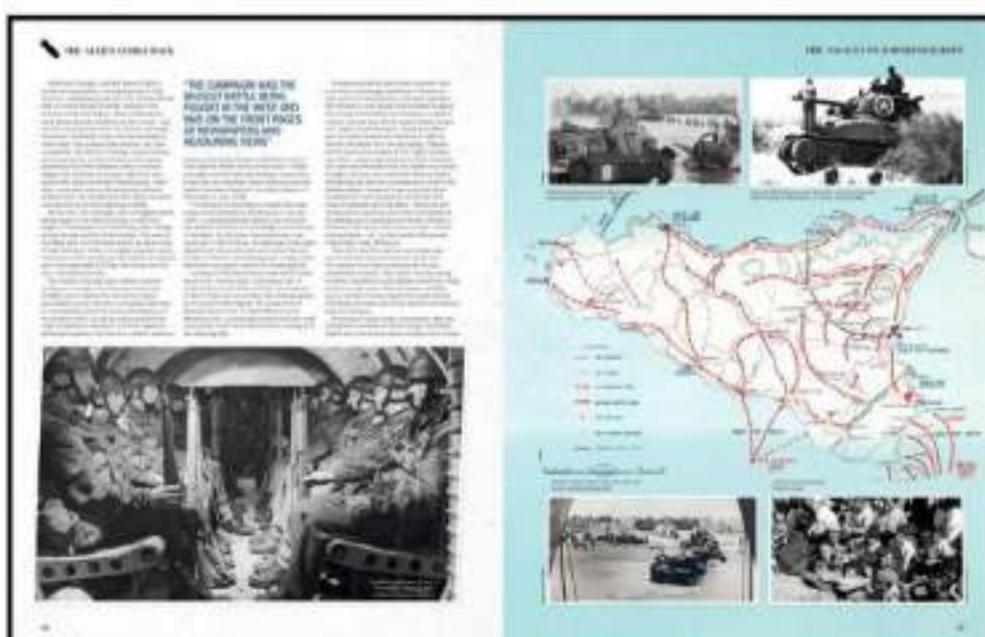
PANZER ATTACK

How Europe was brought to its knees
in the summer of 1940



BOMBING BERLIN

The relentless aerial campaign to bomb
Germany into submission



OPERATION HUSKY

Inside the top-secret mission to attack
the soft underbelly of the Axis



CROSSING THE RHINE

With victory looming, the Allies storm
into Nazi Germany